Lying Down In A World Of Tempest

Lav Diaz

CINEMATEK BOZAR courtisane

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Over and above describing himself as a filmmaker, Lav Diaz prefers the definition of "cultural worker". Driven by a sense of political engagement, he has denounced the series of miseries suffered by the Philippines since the time of Spanish colonialism (followed by occupations by both the Japanese and the Americans, as well as a period of martial law), focusing particularly on the years of the Marcos dictatorship. It is a feeling of love for his compatriots and their suffering that pushed him to depict, with a beauty and sense of urgency rarely found in cinema, the daily grind of life in small towns and in the countryside.

Yet the lengthy, majestic black-and-white frescoes, lasting anywhere between 4 and 11 hours, which brought him to notice on the festival circuit, surely cannot be restricted to kinship with the Slow Cinema movement. Characterised by a radical formalism, his cinematic approach is to recount the life and rhythm of his community by means of the suffering and slowness that define it. It is for these reasons that Lav Diaz can be seen as a major artist for our times: his cinema is that of a pedagogue—something shared here with that of his intellectual, idealistic father and, still more, with Lino Brocka whose wish it was "to educate his people"—as well as bearing essential witness. The extraordinary duration of his films, their lengthy shots displaying a superb harmony, their realism ("life in real time"), all combine to demolish the system in order to liberate ourselves from the constraints of the present day.

It is with enormous pride that CINEMATEK, BOZAR and Courtisane come together to present the first Lav Diaz retrospective in Belgium—and, to date, the largest in Europe—and to welcome the director from 10–12 November for a symposium in Antwerp and two evenings in Brussels.

Nicola Mazzanti
CINEMATEK, *Director*

Paul Dujardin
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Courtisane, *Director*

From What Is Before (*Mula sa Kung Ano ang Noon*). Lav Diaz. 2014 © Sine Olivia Pilipinas

How to come to terms with the history of a country that is haunted by memories of colonization, rebellion and oppression, a country that continues to wrestle with itself in search for meaning and identity? The weight of this question makes itself felt in every frame, in every face, breath and gesture inhabiting the films of Lav Diaz. From his feature debut, *Serafin Geronimo: Criminal of Barrio Concepcion* (1998), to his latest *From What Is Before* (2014), all of his films are deeply rooted in the history and politics of his home country, the Philippines. They bear the wounds of a troubled past that have never been able to heal, as the shadows cast by the Spanish and American colonization, the conflict between Moro Muslims and Christians, and Ferdinand Marcos' imposition of Martial Law still loom heavily over the country. Even though the dictatorship has come to an end almost thirty years ago, the harms and injuries produced by the past have never seemed to wither away, but have grown ever more inward. This legacy of trauma and disempowerment, of "stifled hands and silenced voices," as Alexis Tioseco wrote, is what can be felt reverberating in Lav Diaz' shattering tragedies of sin, guilt and redemption.

It seems unlikely to be a coincidence that 19th century Russian literature, especially the work of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, has never been far from his mind. Already in *Serafin Geronimo*, which starts out with a quote from *Crime and Punishment*, Diaz seems to have established his main theme: the search for redemption, a theme which continues to run through his oeuvre, from the Tolstoy-inspired *Death in the Land of Encantos* (2007), in which a onetime political prisoner confronts his former interrogator, to *Norte, the End of History* (2013), which begins with a Raskolnikov-like figure committing murder, but develops into an allegory about Marcos. And just as the Russian novelists sought to depict "the Russian soul" by making full use of the temporal spaciousness of their prose epics, Diaz' portrayals of the lives and suffering of the Filipino people unfold over epic lengths of time, stretching over multiple hours. This duration gives Diaz a grand canvas on which he patiently sketches painstaking diagrams of the factors and events that shape the multiple, interconnected lives of the people he observes, unfurling into panoramic meditations on morality, violence and death, torn between humanist faith and materialist despair.

Cinema as window onto the troubled soul of the world, as a quest for the inner life of reality in all its mystery and ambiguity: in Lav Diaz' work yesteryear's dream of André Bazin appears to have found a contemporary follower, a filmmaker who is not about to tone down his search any time soon. As he himself has said, "I would go to any extent in my art to fathom the mystery of humankind's existence. I want to understand death. I want to understand solitude. I want to understand struggle. I want to understand the philosophy of a growing flower in the middle of a swamp."

Cinematek, Bozar and Courtisane, in collaboration with VDFC, are proud to present the first Belgian retrospective to date of the work of Lav Diaz. On November 10–12 the filmmaker will be present in person to talk about his work, as well as that of Lino Brocka, who has made an indelible mark on the culture and cinema of the Philippines, and to whom Diaz paid homage in *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (2004).

Stoffel Debuysere
KASK/HoGent, *Programmer*

Batang West Side, Lav Diaz, 2001

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Alexis Tioseco

Indictment And Empowerment Of The Individual: The Modern Cinema Of Lav Diaz

I

"The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and human responsibility."

—Vaclav Havel

From the first frames of his first feature-film—a memorable long shot of a man on his knees amidst an open field in the Dostoevsky-inspired *Serafin Geronimo, Kriminal ng Baryo Concepcion* (1998), to the final frames of his last—the epilogue *A Story of Two Mothers* that closes *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* (2005), Lav Diaz has been chronicling the crushing weight of guilt on those who seek redemption. Diaz's cinema is modern in many respects, but none so much as in relation to the norms and history of Philippine society, culture, and cinema. In seven years and spanning seven feature-films (including the forthcoming *Heremias*), he has developed a body of work that stands alone in contemporary Philippine cinema, seeking out new ground both formally and thematically, and challenging the legacy left behind by the great Lino Brocka.

* * *

As a country, the Philippines has had a troubled and arduous past. Initially struggling to free itself from Spanish and American colonizers, it now, independence gained, wrestles with itself in search of identity and direction, pointing fingers when it ought to take responsibility. The shadow cast by Ferdinand Marcos' imposition of Martial Law stills looms prominently over the country, nearly twenty years after the dictator's reign has ended. Marcos created a legacy; not only of fame and wealth, but of stifled hands and silenced voices; a legacy of disempowerment.

Filmmaking in a country is often at its most gripping when its citizenry are in their most dire straits. Many Filipino filmmakers, from Ishmael Bernal (*Nunal sa Tubig*, 1975, *Manila By Night*, 1980 and *Himala*, 1982) and Mike De Leon (*Kisapmata* and *Batch 81*, both made in 1982) to Peque Gallaga (*Oro, Plata, Mata*, 1982 and *Scorpio Nights*, 1985), created their best works during Marcos' rule. The most prominent filmmaker in the country during this period, both cinematically and vocally, was Lino Brocka. Brocka's was, when granted the opportunity, a cinema of opposition; one that challenged the status quo, and painted a horrifying picture of society at its most desperate. Fighting to be heard amidst a crassly commercial industry and strict censorship, Brocka often had to sacrifice making several commercial features in order to make one work of substance.

It is from these two strains—Martial Law and Brocka—that Diaz both gained his inspiration and begins his point of departure.

Diaz first encountered the power of cinema watching Lino's *Maynila* as a college student. "That film changed my perspective on cinema" , Diaz imparted to me in a 2002 interview, "[It made me realize that] this medium is very powerful: you can use it to change people's minds; their conditions; their perspectives. From then on I said I want to make good art films; for my people."

* * *

Debuting to critical acclaim in 1998, Diaz's *Serafin Geronimo, Kriminal ng Baryo Concepcion*, announced the arrival of a major talent, and a possible new direction for Philippines cinema. Where Brocka had examined society's effect on the individual, Diaz's *Kriminal* looked at the effect of the individual's actions on his conscience. His Russian influences written on his sleeve—the film begins with a quote from *Crime and Punishment* translated into Tagalog—Diaz's hero was akin to that of Dostoevsky but atypical of Philippine cinema; a quiet man with a guilty past seeking redemption in the present. With *Kriminal*, Diaz laid down his archetype character and began to plot the path of his aesthetic.

In 1999 Diaz completed two more films for Regal films (producers of *Kriminal*), the farcical *Burger Boys*, whose shooting actually began before *Kriminal*, and *Hubad Sa Ilalim ng Buwan*. *Burger Boys*, about a group of youths writing a screenplay about a group of youths planning a bank robbery, is a curious film, and one that seems most out of place in the context of Diaz's oeuvre. Filled with close-ups, quick cutting, conscious camera angles, strange costume design, and oddball characters, it is most interestingly seen as a genre experiment by an anti-genre filmmaker.

Hubad Sa Ilalim ng Buwan brought Diaz back to more familiar territory. An ex-priest and failed husband (Joel Torre), whose daughter (played by starlet Klaudia Koronel) sleepwalks in the nude plagued by memories of being raped, questions his decisions and examines his past, as his life slowly crumbles before him in the present. Again, we have a hero, quiet, introverted, searching. The film received favorable reviews, and screened in the Berlin International Film Festival, but was also re-cut with additional sex scenes (shot without Diaz) inserted at the producer's behest.

It was in the independently produced *Batang West Side* (2001), arguably the first modern Filipino masterpiece, that Diaz fully realized his aesthetic and first tackled, indirectly, the theme of Martial Law. At a startling five-hours, then the longest Filipino film ever made, and shot almost entirely in the US (save for brief but powerful dream sequences), *Batang West Side* dealt with an issue close to home for Diaz and many in his country, that of the Filipino diaspora abroad. The subject matter had been dealt with before (Laurice Guillen's *American Adobo*, 2001), but here the issues and characters were more than melodrama and caricatures. Brilliantly sketched and cast, so fully realized on the screen; allowed to sit, stand, breathe, and exhale (a key motif throughout the film, including its final scene), they became cinematic equivalents of people you knew—your mother, father, brother, sister, cousin, lover, or grandfather. Diaz's quiet unobtrusive camera registered every detail of Filipinos from all walks of life in the US. Treating every minute as precious, he utilized the films long running time to masterful effect, allowing scenes, moods, and relationships to sink in as deep with his actors as with his audience. *West Side*'s plot, revolving around the death of a Filipino youth on a New Jersey street corner, served as a metaphor for the state of Filipinos today. Officer Mijarez, himself harboring a dark past, interrogates the entire Filipino community in search of the murderer, in search of truth, of a face on whom to place the blame. By the films end Mijarez's investigation has drawn to a close, but nothing conclusive about Hanzel's death has

been determined. "If I push for the case, I'll be killing a lot of Filipinos", Mijarez says, and as the last frames roll out we understand why: ***we are all our responsible***.

Diaz followed *West Side*, with another Regal Films production, *Hesus Rebolusyonaryo* (2002). *Hesus* was an ambitious science-fiction film set in a future not so dissimilar from the past (the year is 2010). Using as a recurring theme a song by the rock-band The Jerks that comments on the circular nature of history, Diaz projects his concerns, nay paranoia, for what the future will hold for a society that has not yet learned from its mistakes. The films complex story plays out less as a traditional futuristic thriller, than a psychological mind-game, as we witness the interplay of action and discourse between the three main characters—Kumander Miguel (Ronnie Lazaro), Col. Simon (director Joel Lamangan) and the revolutionary Hesus Mariano (Mark Anthony Fernandez). "Future Tense": the title of film critic Noel Vera's review of the film, aptly sums up its mood.

In April of 2003 Diaz returned to nine-year old unfinished work. Using DV in place of 16 mm film due to lack of budget, he set out to complete an intimate epic set just before, during, and after martial law. In January 2005, the final cut of his 11-hour masterwork, the beautiful confusion *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* (2005), premiered at the Rotterdam International Film Festival. *Ebolusyon* recreates scenes of rural life splicing them between and with harrowing historical footage from the period. "Is there a direct correlation between the historical footage presented and the lives of the characters in the film?", one begins to ponder, watching the film. While it is not hard to imagine the psychological implications a state imbued with fear brings, the direct connection between the two appears missing, a telling clue as to the point Diaz is making. One would commonly expect a film that deals with such an important period of a county's history to focus on large-scale events. Boldly, Diaz points his camera in another direction, choosing not to make a reductive statement indicting the former leader, but instead demonstrating and dramatizing the effect individual choice has in the face of societal forces. At the same time that Diaz sympathizes with the burden that his people have borne, he also appears to declare the futility of placing blame for ones woes entirely on society. It is for this reason that such a disparity exists between the illustration of historical events and Diaz's depiction of fictional lives. Diaz chooses not to show us the direct effects of key moments in history on the lives of the characters, but rather the role that their own choices played in determining the courses of their lives. Puring's strength, her deep belief in the fertility of the land and the importance of education, Kadyo's good-natured but misguided attempts at supporting his loved ones, Reynaldo's departure from and return to his new family, the moving epilogue *A Story of Two Mothers* that ends the film; these are all sketches coalescing into a grand collage, a work of art that both indicts and empowers the individual in the face of oppression; declaring him responsible for his own salvation.

* * *

You can feel the weight of history, of the past, in every frame of a Lav Diaz film. It's written in the worn wrinkles on the faces of his characters, in their stammered speech, their furrowed brow; their moments of silence. This is the key to Diaz's cinema, and the well from which it draws its strength and importance. While many filmmakers in the Philippines, having been bred and influenced by the films and words of Lino Brocka (correct for their time, out of place now) seek to emulate the path of his career, Diaz has adapted and grown, stepped back and attempted to understand the present picture of our country and its people today. Twenty years ago, when under the rule of a sole dictator, we knew well whose wrists deserved to feel the sharp ends of our knives. Today, in a society so quick to judge and pass blame, the only flesh that remains to be examined is our own. Diaz's camera, steadfast, unwavering, reveals the truths only found beneath the surface, and points us on the path to deliverance.

Originally commissioned for the 2005 Torino International Film Festival Catalogue for their retrospective on Lav Diaz.

Ebolusyon ng isang pamilyang Pilipino (*Evolution of a Filipino Family*). Lav Diaz. 2004

Alexis Tioseco In Conversation With Lav Diaz

II

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Beginnings

Alexis Tioseco
Who gave the workshop that you attended in Mowelfund?[1] And related question: who have been instrumental teachers and mentors for you in cinema? Lamberto Avellana? Christoph Janetzko? Nick Deocampo? Gil Portes?

1
Movie Workers Welfare Foundation, Inc. (MOWELFUND). mfi.org.ph

Lav Diaz
The workshop was conducted by Surf Reyes, Nick Deocampo, Mac Alejandre and Raymond Red. There were guest speakers. I remember Peque Gallaga. Some experts in the different fields of cinema. Months later, Janetzko conducted a 16 mm workshop. I was assistant director to Gil Portes in one of the movies he shot in New York. I had a short but very memorable gig with the late great Lamberto Avellana. It was really fun. He was a one-man-overload sort of a guy because he had so many plans, so many things in his mind—films, documentaries, TV series, TV commercials, educational modules, corporate modules, even radio jingles and Christmas carols. But most of the time it would just be listening to him talk and talk, not just cinema but also about libido, sex, women, his great love for theater. He was always laughing; he laughed hard. A very inspiring man, very intelligent. He was a speaker in one of the scripwriting workshops conducted by Mowelfund. Then, he invited me and Manny Buising to write for him. We were always at his office having fun, writing some concepts, in awe of this man, very free-flowing, and then suddenly he died. It was fast. And sad. The most inspiring lines from him that I remember [are]: "*Hanapin ninyo ang sarili nating pagkantot. May sariling pagkantot ang Pilipino.*" Some words of wisdom that have truly guided me in my search for my own aesthetic stand and philosophy in cinema.

The Mowelfund workshop was hazy and crazy to me. It was actually a very short workshop; they called it total filmmaking. Before that, I was attending a Ricky Lee workshop. There was an announcement of the Mowelfund workshop. Ricky chose three amongst the workshoppers. I was one of them. These workshops were hazy and crazy because nobody knew that I was a total junkie then. I wasn't an addict but I was on heavy medication for complications in my lungs. I was practically eating and living on drugs. I have very weak lungs. I got lucky; in one of the routinary medical examinations being conducted when doing job applications, a hole and a growth was discovered in my left lung. So, for six months there was this very strict daily injection and popping of so many pills and tablets and liquids. The doctor warned me that if my lungs weren't 'cleared' after the sixth month, there was a possibility that it would slide into lung cancer. I was high everyday, seeming to float when walking; my skin felt thick, numbed and itchy; sounds in my ears were muffled and magnified; my thoughts would go high speed and slow motion and backward and forward and up and down and east-to-west-to-north-to-south. I could walk for hours, I could go motionless for hours, I could be staring at a cockroach for half a day, people would look weird, my writing bordered on dementia, it was a crazy period. And Mowelfund was located then at the basement of the creepy Manila Bay Film Center of Imelda Marcos. Heard of the stories of the hundreds of workers buried alive there so that the 'Madame' could dance with George Hamilton

on time, listen to the Russian piano prodigy and sing "Dahil sa 'Yo" on a yacht going to Corregidor? Imelda is the supreme magic realist being.

Subliminally, my father was my film mentor. He is the quintessential cinephiliac. We were living in the middle of a forest in a far-flung village in Cotabato, Mindanao, but every weekend or [on] holidays we'd never miss [going to] the cinemas. There were four cinemas then in a nearby town, about two hours' drive from the village, and they'd always show double bills and we'd watch them all and we'd talk about them after watching. And my parents are bookworms and storytellers and teachers. They read and read and read. My father was very much into Russian literature. They are very industrious and giving. So, yes, the dialectics and dynamics of that milieu have had lasting impact on my cinema and my view of this world.

Tell me about your start in the film industry. You mentioned to me previously that you began as part of a team that wrote scripts for Fernando Poe Jr. actions films?

During my early years of struggling to break into cinema, because there was no digital yet, and there was such a dearth of cameras especially the 16 millimeter—our camera of choice then, and even super 8 rolls were kind of expensive, to thrive as a filmmaker meant to go mainstream, the so-called 'industry.' And you know, the industry is the status quo and the culture there is very feudal. They protect their turf, they are wary of newcomers especially if you're 'schooled'. To break in was hardcore. That's an understatement; I mean, it is really, really hard. More often, it's more of swallowing your pride and accepting compromise as a norm. And if you didn't know anybody, the only route was to write scripts and show them to people or enter them in competitions. And I won in one such competition, the FPJ-Mowelfund Screenwriting Contest, sponsored by the late Fernando Poe Jr., Philippine cinema's so-called action king. Among the winners, he chose two to work with him in his next projects. I was part of the duo. A veteran writer also assisted us in our initial foray with the industry. It was an experience. I did another project, a comedy, with Regal. After that, I quit. Fernando Poe wanted me to stay with the team but I didn't want to do it anymore. The other part of the duo, Manny Buising, wrote for 'The King' till his last film. Mr. Buising is a Palanca hall of famer.[2]

2
The Palanca Awards or Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature is the Philippines' most prestigious and most enduring literary awards and is dubbed as the "Pulitzer Prize" of the Philippines. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palanca_Award

Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino

Tell me all about the evolution of *Ebolusyon*. I understand you envisioned a different story at the beginning of the film, that of a Filipino seaman who jumped ship in America. But let us start after the Manila scenes had taken prominence, and you had decided to focus on them. At this specific point in time, what was the general plot of the Philippine story? Where did you see the story heading at that point in time, and how close was that to the finished film?.

Well, I had an outline not a plot, some notes to follow, which was quite ambiguous, vague, because I was playing it only in my mind; I was not writing it; I was very much into the organic process at that point, endlessly groping for threads so to speak. This

was when I had decided to pursue the Philippine story and finish it; I mean I decided to pursue a Philippine story; and I would need to find the story. This was during the postproduction period of *Batang West Side*. So there was no general plot to really follow through. Everything was open—I had characters, had shot a lot of their scenes, mostly disjointed, disjointed by the long gaps in production, and so, where were they heading in the totality of the work. I had a premise, that of capturing the struggles of invisible Filipinos in this very dysfunctional, feudal and corrupt system; that was the focus, but there wasn't a story yet. Honestly, there was a point when in utter exhaustion and frustration, my greater urge was just to shake the cross off—an unfinished work that was perennially begging to find closure or just to be disposed of. What I had then were mountains of footage as a result of protracted shootings through the years. Watching the footage alone was very tedious, fiercely daunting, and indeed, a test of patience. I had to watch them over and over and then play them in my head to make sense of all the chaos and gaps, taking note of the characters and their ages, the actors and their ages, who's dead and who's alive, continuity issues, and the eventual logistics. But, of course, the promise and possibilities offered by the images were inspiring enough to push me to really finish the work. Through time, they've somehow morphed into some kind of living canvases, the feeling that's akin to discovering or rediscovering old photographs and paintings where you will experience a sense of connection with them, emotional and mystical. I thought they were haunting and beautiful and I felt keenly guilty leaving them gathering dust and heat, hanging and unfulfilled. They offer a kind of spiritual imperative and I didn't want to lose them. I knew that I had something special. But it got stalled again when I shot *Hesus Rebolusyunaryo* ("Hesus the Revolutionary"). And then, through a lot of hassles, *Batang West Side* was finally ready and it was shown. During the show in New York at the Asian American Festival, the idea that I've been waiting for flashed in my head. I had found the thread that would finish the story. It was the idea of a character endlessly looking for gold; a great metaphor that I could work on in mirroring our people's socio/political/spiritual/cultural struggle. It was an invariable trait, truly Filipino, and truly human, too—the endless search for redemption. This was the character of Fernando, played eventually by Ronnie Lazaro. From there, I was able to create linkages amongst the characters and the use of found footage, a continuum that would become the story; the use of time, the period and issues to be encapsulated had become clearer, and in the end, every element galvanized to appropriate the vision that I wanted to pursue for *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* ("Evolution of a Filipino Family").

Ebolusyon depicts a crucial point in Philippine history, but focuses on the micro rather than the macro, and inserts footage from the period to give the film historical footing. Tell me about the structure of *Ebolusyon*, and the distinction and rationale for the insertions of 16 mm and historical footage.

The micro would provide substance to the macro; the macro is a mirror of the micro; the micro is the essence of the macro, and vice versa. Insertion of historical footage is a kind of landmarking or sign-posting to reinforce the period being tackled by the story, but I insert the footage, even the flashbacks or memories and dreams,

unobtrusively, indeliberately; they are rhythmically free-flowing; they just come and go practically as the story progresses. There is no sense of chaptering in any manner; their role is to contextualize the characters; they amazingly point to a certain period of time in a very exacting way even without putting subtitles and dates. A woman i.e. Huling endlessly walking in the fields juxtaposed with the image of EDSA is very Filipino and it points to a very particular period of our history. Huling, despite her existence in a different milieu is authentically a representative of every individual marching in EDSA; the causality is distinctly Filipino because of the distinct period being represented. Huling and EDSA is analogous to Ninoy Aquino and Marcos, Lino Brocka and Marcos, the military, Marcos and Kadyo, the eternally transient and lost boy Raynaldo and the lost Filipino soul. All my works focus on stories about people, individuals, a milieu, a culture; to be very particular: about Filipinos, the Filipino struggle, the Filipino history. Micro characters like the deranged Hilda Gallardo inhabit these stories, and it is their story that would give meaning to a bigger backdrop, may it be sociological, political, economical and spiritual, or philosophical even. The story of an individual Filipino is the story of the Filipino struggle. In *Ebolusyon*, brutalization of the micro characters comes in the form of poverty, marginalization and utter neglect by the system; the brutalization is given more emphasis by a capsuling of an extremely fascistic period, which is Martial Law. The status of being poor by itself is overtly and covertly brutal, and then, here comes a system that is overtly and covertly dysfunctional. Using that premise made the vision of *Ebolusyon* easier to pursue. I have a very clear picture of that period and the characters' struggles. I grew up during that period and I know the characters; I have tried to understand that period and I will continue to try to fathom it, and ultimately, with my works, I am examining and confronting it, and still struggling to understand it—can we save Raynaldo? Can we save the Filipino soul?

Structuring is never a problem. My process by then would be to write the daily struggles of my characters. I will just follow them, and oftentimes I would actually write the script, the dialogues a day before the shoot or during the shoot, oftentimes as instinct and common sense would suggest. Oftentimes too, I would reject intellectualizing creation in relation to the characters and culture they are representing: it must just be honest. In relation to traditional cinema language: no rules but my rules. I didn't rule out theoretical discourse of course, because you cannot escape it, but at the end of the day, my overriding rule is just to search for the truth, which actually simplified the struggle, albeit it was a hard-won struggle. Of course, thinking of the footage then was very daunting especially during the postproduction. Also, there was the issue of mixing digital footage and 16 millimeter. And it was a big issue at first because I can actually see the difference. For a time, of course, I sank into the issue of celluloid versus digital, too. There was a disturbing discourse going on inside of me. The atmosphere was not unlike the times of the advent of sound in cinema where "the great debate" ensued. But ultimately, the issue is aesthetic—digital or celluloid, silent or sound, color or black and white—[because] the medium is [still] cinema. I focused on my materials. These are my materials, my footage; I might as well make the best out of them. I will make it work. My experience with installation art using found objects helped me a lot. During my years living in the East Village in New York, ninety percent of my friends were painters

and performers, all struggling. And all of them are basically 'found-object artists'—the kind who would work on what they have and what they can find; they thrive on their limitations and they made great art; we made great art in our own small spaces and even in the streets. This praxis, which is embraced by a lot of artists as a kind of ideology, has become very useful and a handy armour to me, too. I'm not afraid anymore. And so, I embraced digital.

During postproduction, with the kind of footage that was at hand, [it could only have been an] ellipsis in terms of structure. And *Ebolusyon* is truly elliptical with the interweaving of so many characters and different periods within the span of sixteen years, 1971 to 1987; even the historical footage was not chronologically arranged.

Ebolusyon is the first film you've made with a digital finish, and the first feature-film of yours that you edited yourself (after having gone through two editors is it? before taking up the task itself). I understand that you have been highly involved in the editing of your films in the past, but how different was it for you this time as the actual hands-on editor, and how important was this in the shaping of the film? Had you had any previous experience as the hands-on editor on a film before?

I haven't had troubles or problems with past editors, or the proper term would be co-editors, because even with them cutting, I would be very much involved with the structuring, with the whole process. I'm in control. Every editor knows that the degree of freedom given to him/her, especially with works involving filmmakers who obstinately pursue and value their aesthetic, philosophy and vision, even politics and ideology, starts and ends in putting the pieces [together] as obliged by the maker. This is not to undermine the great role of true editors because a big part of being a great editor is a true understanding of the filmmaker he is working with. Everything will be and must be adjusted to that. That's a given. Of course, in commercial studios, it would be very different. In the case of *Ebolusyon*, I had to do it myself because honestly, nobody could do it but me. Eleven years of protracted shooting, loads of footage, and without a proper storyline or script to follow, the task was just so overwhelming and intimidating; the first two editors who tried to help just disappeared, or dissipated in utter frustration. And so, I sat down in my own cramped studio for a year and did it. The difference was that I had no one to consult or argue with. There was Bob Macabenta, the fledgling but great soundman but his concern was sound. The experience was quite liberating; battling demons and gods and all in a room flooded with souls and images trapped in an eleven-year-struggle, crawling to be shaped into cinema. But the battle was bloody, very bloody, psychologically, and physically, too, considering that at the onset of postproduction, I was just recuperating from a very perilous cancer operation (a malignant but autonomous thymoma, 4.5 inches thick was taken out on top of my heart and in between my lungs). Late July of 2004, I had the first cut ready after six months; it was ten hours and fifty-five minutes long, and it was slated to close the Cinemanila International Film Festival that year. On the day we were laying-in the last subtitles—and we were in fact celebrating by then—the computer suddenly crashed and we lost everything. It was a shocker and a heartbreaker. Back to zero. It was that cruel, painful and hard. I went

through the same process again—digitizing, syncing, mixing, rendering, cutting, dubbing, finding money, etc. It was that insane and petrifying, it could have been easy to just walk out and not give a fuck. The light of day came in January 28, 2005, the final cut; I celebrated the day numbed, weary, and dreamy, thirty thousand feet above the ground inside a Lufthansa jet going to Rotterdam.

The filming for *Ebolusyon* began in 1994, as *Ebolusyon ni Ray Gallardo* ("Evolution of Ray Gallardo"), only seven years after the end of Martial Law. You are addressing a different audience now than from when you began; one more distanced from the events of the period. How has your perspective about the Martial Law period changed—and the impact it has had on us as a people changed—from when you started the work to now (and at points in between)?

My view of Martial [Law] now is not different from my view when I started shooting the film in 1994. It has not changed at all. It remains the darkest period in the history of our people. It is the most devastating chapter of our nation's struggle. It single-handedly created the greatest damage in the Filipino psyche. It remains that way. That's the truth. I'm aware that the degree of passiveness and forgetfulness is growing, and keeps growing, and political immaturity has even gone to a moronic level now. Talk to the young and it won't be a surprise anymore if you'd hear queries like, "What Martial Law?", "Marcos who?", "Ninoy who?", "Lean who?", "Rizal who?", "Bonifacio who?" Very disturbing. And the most disappointing [thing] is that so many Filipinos now are openly saying, in a nostalgic manner, that we should go back to the Marcos years because they believe those were the best years of our nation's political history. You ask the question, what kind of a political perspective does the Filipino have now? Most certainly, it is very retrogressive, tragically amnesiac and most tragically immature. You talk of the impact Martial [Law] had on us as a people? How do we measure that now? Psychologically, we're back to the dark ages. Physically, Martial Law is history but its corrosive impact is imbedded in our culture and we need to correct that. Look at the Executive branch of the system, look at the Senate, look at Congress, look at the people in the streets, look at the people in the barrios, just simply look, man. It is imperative to look and examine what's going on. It is imperative to examine the past. There is that urgency that we just don't acknowledge. We need to have a critical sense of history to help redeem this nation. *Ebolusyon*'s vision is about that.

How was your aesthetic, your mise en scene, changed? And how has time changed your perspective or concept of cinema, and what you want your audience to take with them after seeing your work.

Like I've said, these three works—*Batang West Side*, *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* and *Heremias*—is a 'realization' of a framework that evolved out of a process that I've traversed through in search of my aesthetic and philosophy in cinema, the very familiar *mise en scene*—my use of camera, the duration, the rhythm, the sound, the choice of actors, the blocking, the texture, the kind of stories, the culture that I represent, my vision, the whole canvas. My cinema is as pure as I want it to be

now, in my own terms, pure in terms of the degree of freedom that I put into it, the degree of struggle, and I'm fully aware of the degree of responsibility that comes into it. And like I've said, my cinema now is not into the stereotypical audience concept because I do not make cinema for an audience, as we know it—the box-office-return-of-investment dynamics, the ratings game, and most aversely, it is not seeking anybody's imprimatur, or worse, a step-to-Hollywood-status-quo-trip-to-the-Oscars-moviemaking-exercise. Just like any piece of art of worth, my cinema's aesthetic fulfillment is interaction. I create it, and so it's there. It simply seeks to share a vision. For people who will come and interact with my works, I won't have to explain anything to them. They'll just have to experience it.

For its entire sweeping story, there appears, to me, to be a very personal aspect to *Ebolusyon*. What are your personal memories of the martial law period, and the time thereafter?

True. *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* is very personal to me. I know the characters. I grew up in a farming family, very poor farming families, both from my father's and mother's side. The struggles and travails of these people, I know so well. I've seen it; I've experienced it. I am very much a part of it. I grew up during the Martial Law years. And my experience of Martial Law was very brutal. I was in second year high school when Marcos declared [Republic Act] 1081 upon the land. In Cotabato, the year before the imposition, the pent-up tensions between the Muslims and Christians had exploded into a full-scale war. It was bloody, very bloody, terrifying, horrifying. And it became bloodier during Marcos' reign of terror. While Christians and Muslims were on a rampage butchering one another left and right, the military entered the scene with an even unheard of fascistic fierceness and cruelty. They'd set up checkpoints in all directions; they'd hamlet communities; they'd be declaring so many areas as no-man's lands and shooting any person seen at will, no questions asked. A classic practice was the singing of the National Anthem at every checkpoint. They'd line up civilians who passed by checkpoints and ask them one by one to sing the *Lupang Hinirang*, the Philippine National Anthem. For every mistake you make, you'll get a slap, a kick or a punch from the perennially drunk soldiers, or worse, a bullet in your head. Another regular practice was the midnight scare. They'd come knocking in the middle of the night, force people to open their doors, and point guns on the heads of the slumbering civilians admonishing them, while evoking Marcos' vision of a new society. I've seen people breaking down, begging for their lives, losing their minds. I've experienced being hit with an armalite rifle's butt and then hitting the ground, gasping for air. Our *barrio* was attacked and bombed by fighter planes and decimated bodies were flying all over. I saw Muslim bodies, young and old, pregnant women and babies, being piled up near a highway after a massacre, their houses turned to ashes in the background. I saw tortured and burned bodies of Christians after a massacre, their houses still burning in the background. I saw soldiers continually lining up people and scaring them with their guns while evoking the greatness of Marcos. People vanished. Young people like me were forced to attend *Kabataang Barangay*[3] sessions and we stayed in rooms for days where all the walls were adorned with giant images

[3] Literally means "youth community"

of Marcos; all we heard were speeches of Marcos, his voice hovering even in our dreams, and literature you read was all about Marcos and Imelda. In schools, public and private, textbooks must bear their faces, words and signatures. The conditioning was so monumental. And you didn't need a theorem to sum up what would going to happen to the country. The socio-cultural devastation was just so vast and unheard of, everyday it was staring at us, and really, it was just a mystery why it took Filipinos years to wake up. Why was there apathy? I didn't believe in the popular belief that it was fear that brought the apathy or inaction to our people because the left and other progressive groups and individuals were really fighting against the regime. They put their lives on the line.

Heremias

Heremias, your work-in-progress that you hope to finish this year, looks to be a very long work as well. Perhaps even surpassing the length of Ebolusyon. Explain to me the reason for the length of this film.

Heremias will be another long film. I've shot roughly forty or fifty percent of the film already. Right now, I'm watching and studying the footage. I don't know how long it's going to be but it's definitely going to be long. Again, this is not deliberate. The story is evolving; the characters are growing; new threads are appearing; doors are opening. I can't do anything about it; I have become a slave to this organic process. Being a slave to the process doesn't mean I'm trapped; on the contrary, it is autonomy, letting the canvas grow and fulfill some truths.

You told me in previous conversations that *Heremias* is also the title of a Balintataw TV drama that you wrote in the early 90's, if I remember correctly. Tell me about that script. What was it about? How similar are its themes and characters to the *Heremias* that you are making now? How does it differ?

I wrote a teleplay called *Heremias* for the television series *Balintataw* in the late 80s, around 1989, if I remember right, when I was still writing for the now-defunct Jingle music magazine and freelancing as a film and music critic for the then-fledgling *Manila Standard* newspaper, and also, writing for popular comic magazines. It was a very personal play, an offshoot of my harrowing experience with polio. I was stricken with paralysis when I was about eight years old and I couldn't walk for more than a year. I struggled to relearn how to walk and when I was finally able to walk, I had to deal with a very dysfunctional body motor system—the pain in the bones of the left side of my body, particularly the left foot, remains a recurring problem until today, especially in severe cold and humid conditions. The trauma and shock and stigma stayed with me for so long. It was hell, I tell you. I created a character based on that. The *Heremias* film that I am shooting now is quite different from the teleplay in terms of character background and the age level but the theme is quite parallel in terms of personal struggle—post-trauma-cum-Socratic-perspective. The *Heremias* of *Balintataw* is a young man while the latest incarnation is middle-aged. So, the

obvious difference is on the level of wisdom. And the length, of course. I know that there's still a copy of that episode somewhere because after the series ended its run on television, *Balintataw* continued to tour the episodes in high school campuses as part of an audio-visual educational program. I remember my eldest daughter telling me that she saw *Heremias* in their school.

I visited the set of *Heremias*. While watching a particular long take on a monitor, its duration felt correct; though while standing there during the actual shoot of the scene, a certain impatience grew in me. Does the same happen to your crew?

Impatience is inherent in every film production. It's always there, whether it's my shoot or other people's shoots, whether it's my *mise en scene* or an action director's style of shoot or the so-called full coverage [of] directors' insecurities. Filmmaking is hard work, whether you're working in a big budgeted studio production or in a low, low budgeted independent work. The conception or the pre-production alone eats [up] so much time, then the shoot, and then the postproduction, and then showing it. Hollywood or big studios would shoot a scene with a lot of preparation and profligacy. I lived in a street in New York City before where one day, Hollywood shot a scene of Wesley Snipes. They started coming at dawn, the big trucks and hundreds of crew [members]. They covered two blocks, big lights all over, big cables, lots of policemen, lots of noisy assistant directors and production managers who were all trying to be busy, noisy and gaudy. It was like a whole day of chaos that disoriented us all living there, just the set up. I woke up and went for a walk at 4:30 a.m. while they were starting to set up; I came back after two hours, took a bath, cooked my breakfast, read the New York Times and some magazines, went to Barnes and Noble to check a new book, had coffee with a friend, visited a sick painter friend, went home at 2 p.m., they were still setting up and were a lot noisier. I slept for two hours, woke up and went to have lunch and coffee, went to work in Jersey City, back in New York at around 7 p.m., bought a dirtied book for a dollar in the street along Washington Square Park, had coffee with a friend, and finally, they shot the scene later that night. HMI lights screaming all over town, camera on crane, Mister Snipes comes out of the bar, he walks, *Cut!* Some more retakes. And then they packed up. It was a very brief shoot, but the preparation took them ages.

The process of film production is a test of patience. It's never a breeze. Patience is a virtue in this medium. The story of *Heremias* has been with me since the late 80s. I started shooting it only last year. I shot *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* for eleven years, all in all, I worked with seven cinematographers and ten designers to be able to finish it. I wrote *Batang West Side* in 1996 and was able to shoot late 2000 up to 2001. Pre-production alone took eight months.

My staff and crew think I am a fast director, in terms of shooting a scene. I do make those long, long takes but my ratio would just normally be one is to one or just one take or at the most three takes for every scene. Oftentimes, newcomers on my set would be shocked. What? Just one take? Just three takes? Just one angle? No full coverage? You know, a lot of filmmakers practice the "full coverage" directing—shooting a scene in all angles, top shot, tilt down, tilt up, pan right, pan left, zoom in, zoom out, the dolly, the crane shot, and then do all the close ups, the

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Someone who always needs to be certain and takes no risks.

medium shots, full shots, long shots, establishing shots, cut-aways, lots of reaction shots. They do that on every scene. They call it the *sigurista*[4] directing; you have everything; let the editor suffer the pointlessness of it all. The usual practitioners of this kind of filmmaking are movie industry people. And oftentimes, to be able to achieve this, people would shoot for 36 hours straight killing themselves to exhaustion. And they would light their sets like there are twelve moons at night and twelve suns in the morning. I am not saying that this is not valid, this full coverage exercise. It is still filmmaking indeed. But talk about impatience, man. This is fucking film school. This is a fucking television commercial shoot. This is a fucking product shot shoot. But then it works for them, so ya, man, let's do the take 35 for that fucking close up, apply more make up and open the three HMIs to the maximum.

How important is it for you that the people you are working with understand what you are trying to achieve, and the vision of the work as a whole?

It is very important. But you are talking of the ideal set-up and condition. How cool would it be to have people who truly understand and embrace your vision. But in practice, specifically in filmmaking, it doesn't work that way. Most often, meeting of the minds can only go as far as following a schedule, deadlines and fulfilling a process. Or, some people would want to work with you because they admire your work, would want to experience your process, or simply would just want to work and learn. But as far as vision is concerned, maybe yes, if you are working with a scriptwriter, a producer, a photographer, a designer or an actor who would go that extent—truly understanding what you are trying to achieve.

Always, always, pursuing a vision is a lonely path. You are alone. Even discourse and discussion wouldn't work for you. Your thesis could fail. Your premise could blur. But ultimately, your work will speak for you. Your work will make them understand. Your work will make them realize eventually why you are such a fool.

I understand that, in *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*, the great actress Angie Ferro, who plays the grandmother, is a Marcos loyalist. What was it like working closely on that film with someone whose viewpoint of the period it tackles is directly opposed to yours?

Angie Ferro is one of the greatest actors of our time. She could delineate any role with her brilliance, with her madness, with her darkness. I worked closely with her not just in *Ebolusyon* but also in the television drama anthology *Balintataw* when I was starting. I was also lucky to have seen some of her theatre works and performances. She's truly one of the greats. Her role in *Ebolusyon*, Lola Puring, is a simple apolitical barrio folk; her concern is her family, the education of her granddaughters, the return of a lost grandson, the ideology of the soil. It would be different if the character is anti-Marcos or an activist during the period. I'm sure Angie would object. Yes, she is a hardcore Marcos loyalist. I was shocked when I learned that she is one. I learned about this when I was still in *Balintataw*. Through the years, we had had heated and exhausting confrontations and shouting matches about the matter, about the sins of Marcos, about her blind faith. At first I was really frustrated

and disillusioned because I love and respect her, but then I struggled to understand her. To her, Marcos is a great Filipino, maybe the greatest, and Imelda is the greatest patron of the arts. That stand is her greatest contradiction. Sometimes it's hard to reconcile these things—greatness and contradiction. But think of Wagner, Heidegger and Nazism; Dostoevsky and gambling; Rilke and sexism; Van Gogh and the prostitute; Nora Aunor and shabu; Frank Sinatra and the parrot.

Are there certain positions in the crew/cast that need to understand more than others?

On a conceptual level, working as a team means everyone must know. But in practice, specifically in filmmaking, of course, the levels of discourse for each member of the team will be different. The scriptwriter's perspective will be very different from that of the cinematographer and the designer and the actor. The level of understanding and knowledge that each of these very unique individuals will have for the work at hand will definitely be on different levels also. A director is not just a playmaker who fanatically pursues his mise en scene; he must also be a psychologist who probes his milieu, and a psychiatrist who conducts discourse with his ward. On the human side, I always look at people on equal terms. The director, the utility man, the photographer, the extra, we are all on the same level. Nobody plays god or diva or spoiled ass in my production. Each and everyone's position and functions are clear and important. We struggle to work with dignity.

Aesthetic

In an answer to an earlier question you mentioned "the endless search for redemption". What is it about this theme, which some may say is a trademark in all your films, that strikes you so much?

I believe that the greatest struggle in life is the struggle to become a good human being. That ideal is invariable despite man's ironic variability. That belief, that premise, that stand, that aesthetic, that vision, that discourse, is central to that theme. The very core, the very essence of man's existence is the battle between good and bad, within and without; this is inherent as an immediate and lasting effect of man's intellect and pathos. This we cannot escape because we don't classify ourselves as animals; we are rational and emotional, capable of creating poems of ironies and mystery and transcendence, capable of creating dark, brooding and mystical songs, capable of understanding epiphany in cinema, and capable of going to the moon; this you cannot escape if you truly explore man's being, from the great discourses of history, philosophy, psychology, the humanities, theories and all to the very colloquial banter of a street bum; it's all about that: the struggle for great humanism. We seek redemption, we seek goodness, we seek purgation, we seek answers; even the most misguided and disoriented and solipsistic and narcissistic, and maybe instinctive, destructiveness is all about that. It could get too abstract and ambiguous at some point, this issue of redemption, but in my case as a filmmaker, or simply a

teller of tales, or a visual juggler, I struggle to concretize it by creating concrete beings, concrete characters, concrete conditions, concrete visions, concrete words, concrete pains, concrete sufferings, concrete vistas. I struggle to create characters and canvasses that could honestly represent humanity's struggle. Culture is my retreat in understanding humanity. Or I should say, culture is the key to my struggle towards unlocking and understanding the mystery of human existence because culture seems the only concrete aspect of man's existence. Culture is man's history and dialectic and being.

And I believe, that at this point in man's existence, he is still a big failure, it's a capital F, insofar as humanism is concerned. I should qualify that statement by pointing to wars, despotism, disease, poverty, crimes, and all the injustices man continually and mindlessly inflicts on his being. You know, this is already the twenty-first century and it is truly mind-boggling that we remain primitive and barbaric and ignorant and insensitive and idiotic. Consider these: India building space rockets that cost billions of dollars while thousands upon thousands of its population are starving and homeless; Iraq, Tibet, North Korea, Africa, Aung Sang Syu Ki. The struggle of the first Darwinist human cell, or of The Adam of Eden, remains the same. Are we to conclude then that humanity's curse is his being? That in the end, he will just self-destruct anyway? So, man is nothing? What's the use of struggle for great humanism then if at the end of the long haul, we'll just be relegated to nothing? What are we going to make of the likes of Marx, Jesus, Beethoven, Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Andres Bonifacio, Jose Rizal, Dostoevksy, Kant, Socrates, Freud, Mohammed, Buddha, Che? Fools? How and what about the models and paradigms they've created for humanity? Why care?

The endless search for redemption is man's gift and curse—because man can't be relegated to the generic, to being a genre, to being just a dreaded cliché; because man comprehends the need for change, for progress; because man comprehends the perils of retrogression and relapse. And so, he struggles for the ideal. Struggling for the ideal means man will perpetually suffer, and thus, the vision of redemption becoming perpetually inherent to liberate him from that suffering. Hence, his concept of humanity is redemption. And his concept of redemption is great humanism. The thesis of my cinema gravitates to this discourse. Art is part of that struggle. I am trying to be part of the struggle.

"Better to write for yourself and have no public, than to write for the public and have no self."—Cyril Connolly

You have remained astonishingly faithful to your vision in your two previous films, BWS and Ebolusyon, and in what I have seen in your current project, Heremias. An integral part of this vision it seems is the length. How important is the duration to you? Do you not feel that your films can still be honest and truthful works (i.e. to still be 'writing for yourself' as Cyril Connolly might put it), at a shorter length, which may enable them to appeal to a larger audience, and therefore affect more people?

Duration is very, very important. I have created, or should I say, have embraced a framework for my mise en scene now and the very fulfillment of [the] application of

such framework are *Batang West Side* and *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*. This framework came out very naturally through praxis, the very continual search for an aesthetic stand, an expression that would suit my idea of truth-seeking in my works. Of course, I am fully aware there are paradigms of this vein i.e. the treatise of André Bazin, the works of Antonioni, Tarkovsky, Angelopoulos, Ozu and lately, Bela Tarr (I've only seen *Satantango*), Tsai Ming Liang (I've only seen *The Hole* and *What Time is it There?*) and Hou Hsiao Hsien (I've seen *A Time to Live and A Time to Die*, *City of Sadness*, *Goodbye South* and *Café Lumiere*). But then there is no deliberate perusal of their works that may encourage an actual copying; they come only as inspirations to my own search and practice; integrity of their works is a key and a greater factor in trying to emulate them. The principle of non-compromise and the philosophy that art is free are my foundations. It is only now that I've come to realize a certain pattern in my praxis and aesthetic, hence a mise en scene inherent in my works. But I'm not going to slide into a condition where this framework, or some guiding structural and contextual lines, would become the cardinal form of all of my works, the very curse of dogmatism that I dread. No, the field is open; I will continually search for truths in that horizon. So, the issue of length is a non-issue at all. *Batang West Side* is five hours because it should be that way. *Ebolusyon* is ten hours and forty three minutes because it has just got to be that way. For some time—this is pre-*Batang West Side*—I grappled with the discourse on length/duration. In the end, the issue is just aesthetic, art, period; and even dialectically, reason pointed to a greater understanding of vision and that is to point to a non-compromising framework for a vision to be honest and truthful and relevant, and you don't stop the discourse. And if one is thinking of a greater cinema, it's hard to argue with that. I believe in that, simply, an understanding that cinema is art. And my cinema will continuously struggle to be part of that greater vision of cinema. And non-condescendingly, I am not making films for the stereotypical concept of audience. That concept of audience is very much a factor of that corrosive entertainment philosophy, a traditional status quo and feudal perspective that is bluntly exploitative of a greater mass (where Hollywood is monstrously the greatest practitioner, and whereof the term 'movie industry' had its beginnings) that needs to be educated on humanism and not on consumerism and escapism. With my works, I am only making cinema and all it needs ultimately is interaction, not an audience. The cause and effect are most definitely qualitative. Quality will sternly and surely inch its way towards quantity through the years. No rush. That answers the question why I am so stubborn with my works.

At the end of the day, the greatest way to understand art is silence; it will speak for itself. Reflection. Contemplation. Cognizance. Transcendence. These are better words to understand the mystery of art, its greater role in humanity. And an artist's role isn't just to create, but more importantly to unlock that mystery for the good of humanity, or simply to keep his own perverse sanity amidst the mystery of man's existence.

Why have you decided not to use music in your films?

I am still using music but not in a traditional manner; the conventional extravaganza is gone, the so-called score. Musical scoring is a valid form but conventional application is so tedious and emotionally exploitative. Try studying how the form is applied especially in big-budgeted works, or in a lot of works, old and new. They are so overblown, emotional overkill to the hilt, noisy and nauseous. They just overwhelm every aspect of the *mise en scene*, why not go to an opera instead? Or, do a soap opera. This maximalist and gaudy perspective of putting music, I can never appreciate. The most glaring rationale, of course, is exploitation of the so-called audience; people who practice this play with the mass pathos bordering on the pathetic, they make the pastiche insanely generic and really it's not music anymore. Most of the time, the music is used as a teaser, a punch line, reduced to a shameless cliché, or even a cover for some weakness in a scene or in the totality of the work. I believe that music, or if one puts a score, it could really work well if used ambiently, unobtrusively; it must not get in the way. In the case of my cinema right now, ambient sound is real sound, no score, sound that is inherently part of the canvass, an integral application, not the proverbial icing.

Unfinished Works

How much footage have you shot for the American scenes of *Ebolusyon*?(Is *Ebolusyon ni Rey Gallardo* still the title?). And when would you like to finish the work?

I can't remember how much footage. I'll dig [up] the archive. Some are in Manila and some are in Virginia. In my estimate, there's about three to five hours' worth of film there when cut. Haven't worked on the title yet but I've decided to make a silent film out of it, or maybe an experiment on silent and talkie. I will be shooting some more scenes. I need to review the footage. I have some video transfers of the early shoots, around '94 to '96. The different shots of the faces of the Pinoy war vet ghost (Behn Cervantes) and the pitiful jump-shipper (Ronald Bregendahl) and the dead actor Mike Fernandez are haunting in black and white. The shots of the 90s East Village is haunting as well, really haunting and eerie at times, especially those with the Twin Towers as backdrop. Just walked around the East Village the other day, September 4, a Sunday. Some old buildings in my former neighborhood, the Bowery area (from Houston Street to 14th Street), are gone—appraised as 'condemned buildings' by the city government so they had to go. The great old East Village landscape is changing. Sad, man. CBGB is under siege, too; there was a long line for that day's performances when I passed by. Albeit protesters include Steve Van Zandt, Patti Smith, and a roster of who's who in the NY rock/punk scene, the greatest rock 'n' roll church will go. Dura lex sed lex. The law may be hard but it is the law, so CBGB must go. The only thing that they could do now is to look for a new venue. And I hear the latest development is that Mayor Bloomberg is offering some help for the transfer. I'm sad and angry. Long live CBGB! I lived just a minute away for three years, underground and on top of a building with no elevator.

I'll start working on the cut middle of next year. But again, I won't have or I can't pinpoint an exact date of finishing it. I am really compelled now to add more scenes to make it a fulfilled work.

Ebolusyon ni Ray Gallardo was not originally intended to be silent when you began. Why silent? How will you adjust it to make it silent—use of title cards?

> The maze of footage as a result of the long gaps [between the] shoots created sort of a puzzle and labyrinthine hieroglyphics that's really hard to decipher. I tried and tried to decode it, but to no avail. What to do, man? Make it silent. Do the easy fix. That's a joke. Silent film is no easy fix. It's a great art. I am a great fan of that art. Lest we forget, cinema started silent. And during the advent of sound, there was monumental resentment amongst so-called purists then. This is akin to the advent of digital. Some people called themselves purists and they declared their fidelity with celluloid. But now they own [the] latest and [most] advanced digital camcorders. Like I told you, when I decided to exclude all the US scenes from the final cut of *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*—these are the footage shots from '94 to '98—I was fully aware that there's three-hours' or five-hours' worth of film there. Yes, I've been mulling over the idea of making it silent since [the] middle of last year, been telling people every time they asked about the US scenes. And it has actually gained mythical status because of these talks: the other *Ebolusyon* becoming this very long silent film. The issue remains hypothetical though. But there's [really] a greater chance of doing it silent after the viewings that I did with the old footage.

Tell me about your two short films, *Step No, Step Yes*, and *Banlaw*.

> *Banlaw* was some sort of a thesis work for the Mowelfund workshop that I attended in 1985. Shot on super 8, three minutes running time. It's the story of an idealist; again, a Socratic being. Looking back now, I realized that it was my first Socratic character. The protagonist was a young man who views the world with absolute goodness but also with a heavy pessimism. He believes that the world is going terribly malevolent and retrogressive. He watches television and he sees a Buddhist burning himself as an ultimate act of sacrifice to save mankind. He is well-aware that everyday his activist friends are going underground and some have been tortured and killed by the Marcos regime. He walks the streets of Manila and he sees hungry people, thousands of lost street kids, beggars. Inspired by the young Buddhist, he walks naked in protest and then kills himself. I love the rain effect that we did. I stole a shot from Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. Time to ask forgiveness from Mowelfund: I stole the only copy [of *Banlaw*] before I left for the US in 1992. My act wasn't deliberate though. I visited Mowelfund and I saw our works scattered on this long table. I mean, the films were scattered there—16s, super 8s, video tapes—and you know Mowelfund then, the doors were open twenty-four hours, and people were coming in and out, stoned, drunk, gaudy, haughty, hungry, horny and totally fucked up, or fucking each other, and spaced out. I saw *Banlaw* lying on the edge. It was actually on the edge of the table in its utter blackness and smallness, and a slight push would push it to oblivion. I was scared; I might as well get hold of it; I reckoned I would return it in better times. I grabbed it and slipped it in my bag. When I got to New York, it helped me connect with the struggling independents in the East Village; I have this badge, [this] little crude film to show them. It even saved me from going hungry; we'd do underground showings of shorts, in basements literally, and ask for donations. I kept transferring. I lost it in the process, in one of the basements in Jersey City, I believe.
>
> *Step No, Step Yes* was a video work. The year was 1988. Mowelfund had just acquired video equipments and Larry Manda was in charge then of taking care of those equipments. We were excited with this new medium, not as expensive as 16 and super 8; we decided to shoot. I wrote a script with the writer Rey Arcilla. We shot three weekends in the squatters' area in Pasay City called Leveriza, a very dangerous place then. On the last day of our shoot, a man was killed over an argument of his supposed nonpayment of a two-peso *turon*[5] he ate. Bloody and scary, but we finished the shoot. It's the story of a whore and a peeping tom. I would say it was a very fulfilling exercise for us. I directed the work but I credited Larry and Rey as co-directors. A copy is still in Mowelfund; I haven't seen it since. Well, when the Mowelfund guys did some interviews of us alumni, they ran it as a background visual when they were [interviewing] me.

5 similar to egg rolls, the turon is a Filipino snack of banana wrapped in lumpia wrapper (a thin "skin" made of flour or cornstarch, eggs and water) and then deep-fried. (http://web.foodnetwork.com/food/web/encyclopedia/termdetail/0,7770,3872,00.html)

Tell me about your unfinished work—*Sarungbanggi ni Alice*.

> This will be the longest shoot of my life. Could be, I don't know. Honestly, I'm not even sure now if I'll be able to or how I'll be able to find a sort of a culmination to the process. It's a documentary and I started shooting in 1993; a three-hour, work-in-progress-cut opened the First Filipino-Arts Festival of San Francisco in 1994. The subject of this work is a Filipina book vendor in Greenwich Village. She's been selling books in the streets of New York for three decades. A Filipina selling books in the streets of New York for three decades, man! I thought her story belongs to the pantheon of classic and quintessential Filipina struggles. Her name is Alice Morin. She's from Masbate. I met her when I was working with the Filipino weekly paper *The Filipino Express*. Hers is a very unique struggle. I was shocked to learn that a Filipina is in the streets of New York everyday, winter, spring, summer and fall; oftentimes she's the only woman amongst a majority of black vendors. She has three children with her many relationships with black men. I started shooting her immediately after her story came out as a feature in our paper. I'm still shooting her every time I'm in New York. In 2004, when I visited her in her regular spot along 6th Avenue and 8th Street, she was gone. She transferred to Virginia Beach according to her friends. I have made plans to look for her in Virginia but I haven't been able to do it. Time and money issues again.

What have you learned about her thus far? How did she first arrive in NY?

> She lives in Virgina Beach now according to the street book vendors of Manhattan. I'll go look for her after *Heremias*. I did try to make contact through the mobile number they gave me but the number is not working anymore. Alice Morin's life is the quintessential Filipino struggle, an epic of a struggle. Unbelievable. Her struggle is really sad and harrowing, but she is such a fighter; I know she'll never succumb to life's follies. She came to America via a Green Card when she a married a US soldier who was stationed in Olongapo City where the American base was before.

Tell me about your unfinished work, *Malamig ang Mundo* ("The World is Cold").

Malamig ang Mundo was an exercise film, shot two weekends on betacam in Alexandria, Virginia; autumn of 1995. Admittedly, the exercise was really meant more for self-exorcizing. Though I had just nailed down the co-production agreement with Paul Tanedo for *Ebolusyon* and we had actually shot some scenes already, I had had recurring anxiety attacks every time I thought of the road ahead: I knew then that *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* was going to be a long, long trek of filmmaking. And so, for some release during the long breaks, I offered the story of *Malamig* to Rommel Simon, the Filipino who lent me his postproduction studio in Alexandria, Virginia where I did the video presentation cut of *Ebolusyon*. I told him of my plan: to shoot a sort of an exercise film; we'll shoot in two weekends, cut it fast, and then use it as presentation material to raise funds and eventually shoot it on 35 millimeter. Man, it was a very fulfilling exercise. There were a lot of limitations like we worked on a two thousand dollar budget with the involvement of an inexperienced crew and lot of non-actors; I just gathered them at random, people who were available and made a fast and easy workshop on production. My greatest failure in that work was that I haven't fulfilled my promise and responsibility yet—that of finding the fund for its eventual 35mm shoot. It's been ten years. *Malamig* is a Filipino story set in the heartland of America; the premise revolved around the seasons of cold (winter, spring and autumn) in America—the alienation, solitude and loneliness, and even anger, it bestows on aliens like Filipinos. A Filipina who's long been married to a white man but is unable to have a child finally decides to get her long-suffering mother from the Philippines. But once the mother arrives, memories of brutalities she experienced from her childhood returns to the woman. She becomes very vengeful and cruel to her mother. But more than the very physical attributes that the story shows like nature's coldness and the woman's beatings of her mother, the underlying theme was the pathos and cruelty of poverty, of course; again, the quintessential Filipino struggle 'outside' of the motherland, how do we deal with estrangements, detachments, with the past.

The premise of *Malamig ang Mundo* is fascinating. What is the current running time of the work? How complete is the story as is? Would you continue it on DV or restart completely on film? Do you intend to shoot with the same cast? Are you still in touch with them?

I can't remember the length now, but it's more than two hours. I wrote a full script; some people still have copies of it, I'm sure, the actors and the then de facto crew. I found a beta copy in our old house in Paranaque, sent it to Olaf Moller. Torino fest learned of it and got hold of the copy during the fest and they decided to make a surprise viewing but unfortunately, when they reviewed the tape, it snapped. I don't have any plans right now. I will think about it after *Heremias*. I'm not in touch with the people who worked and acted in that film for the last ten years. Yes, *Malamig ang Mundo* is full of promise.

This is a question I have always thought fascinating, but have rarely seen asked to filmmakers. How has the travelling you have done because of your films (i.e. attending festivals) affected you as a filmmaker?

Besides the great film viewings and the unavoidable dizzying festival artifices that would oftentimes border on circus-like milieus, travel has continually broadened my perspective: the diversity, the contradictions, the uniqueness of cultures, the effects of borders on people ([and] on humanity as a whole), the complexities of geography, the beauty and mystery of language, the reality and myth of race, versions and revisions of history, political views, ideological lines, religions, architecture, seasons, economics, philosophies. For an artist, these are forces that somehow help enrich and broaden aesthetic discourse. Listening to disparate interpretations of struggle after a viewing of *Batang West Side* in Kaluga, an old town in Russia, was quite an eye-opener to me. I had had the same experiences in Zagreb, Croatia, in Goteberg, Sweden, in Berlin, in Turin, in Flanders, in Vienna, in Moscow, in Toronto, in Kuala Lumpur, in Singapore, in Hong Kong, in Cebu. The levels of discourse fascinated me. These cultures have acquired and developed different levels of appreciation for the arts. In some societies, they really acknowledge the role of the arts in shaping their culture, in shaping the very essentials of their lives. While some societies, specifically those that are still in the margins, have a vague notion of what art can contribute to their lives. Art what? What culture? You know, it's hard to argue with a farmer who will tell you that a grain of rice is better than film. Why waste time in a ten-hour-forty-three-minute-long film like *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* when his family needs some grain? Who needs Da Vinci in a hungry Burmese village? But yes, I really appreciate these travels. Meeting and having discussions with filmmakers and scholars and street vendors in Torino helped in shaping a greater vision and aestheticism. These experiences affirm my belief that great art can create great culture. Great cinema is relevant in our struggle. Great film is great grain, I must tell the farmer.

How do you intend to tell the farmer this?

The farmer plants rice; he keeps the rice healthy and safe from drought and food and insects and animals to insure great produce; he sells the rice and feeds on the rice; it's his life. It's the simple philosophy of nurturing, feeding and living. What you feed on is what you are. You nurture our people with good art, or with good works; you feed our people on good art; naturally, we will have great culture. You nurture our people with Socratic ideals; we will have a great nation. We shouldn't just fill the stomach; the soul needs nurturing, too. The rice functions on the former and art functions on the latter. How do I/we intend to do this? Application. Clearly, in my case, the struggle doesn't end in making the film. With the kind of film that I'm making, there is greater struggle in propagation. We must bring the film to the people. *Batang West Side* was only shown here four times, maybe, five times; *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*, three times. The reasons are obvious; they are

very, very long and no theatre would show it without me shouldering all the cost or some responsible sponsors. I've been trying to get grants, funds and sponsorships to have them shown here, to conduct a tour on campuses and villages.

When did you first move to New York, and how much time have you spent there since you moved there? How has living there affected you as a filmmaker, and as a Filipino?

I arrived in New York on the 21st of July 1992. Fate brought me there. It wasn't planned at all. A commissioned video documentary I did on the street kids of Manila was invited to participate in a multimedia exhibit-tour of key areas of the US. When I got to New York, a Filipino newspaper invited me to be part of their staff. I stayed and worked as one of their editors. New York provided me some freedom, aesthetically and economically. My decision to live in New York has been all about pursuing greater heights for my art while liberating my family from the clutches of poverty. In Manila, I had reached a dead-end. I was practically killing myself working in newspapers, my last [job] being a deskman in a Tagalog tabloid, and [I was also] submitting scripts in television serials, writing unproduced screenplays, writing scripts for *komiks*[6]. I was a book salesman while studying law; I wrote serious stuff that won Palancas; I won screenwriting and essay writing contests. But for what, my family was starving. We lived in Krus na Ligas, a squatters' area inside UP Diliman, cramped in a tiny, rented room; we had to sleep in one small bed, the five of us—my wife and my three kids—we had to put chairs on the edges to keep our feet from dangling and be bitten to smithereens by ghetto mosquitoes and rats. All I could do was curse in silence while looking at my friends from film school shooting while I was working as a full-time family man. I didn't regret being a family man because I love my children very much but like I said, we were at a dead-end; there was no relief in sight. And there was no digital then. At some point, I thought I could never do my films. Abandoning music was already a very painful experience (I destroyed my guitar and burned all my songs) and if I were to abandon cinema, I didn't know what I would do. I couldn't afford to kill my soul twice. New York offered some answers: I can fulfill cinema and my family can live without the indignity of hunger. And living in New York didn't lessen our being Filipinos. We remain fiercely Filipino. And I remain a Filipino filmmaker. I will forever be pursuing my discourse on our people's struggle. I live in Manila half of the year; I live in New York half of the year. I don't believe in borders now, I don't believe in this very ancient idea of dividing so-called races, segregating peoples via visas and boundaries and color and language. This concept of border is not just ancient, it is very fascistic and feudal and absurd, especially the first world-third world concept. The concept of borders dehumanizes humanity. It created wars and dumbfounding atrocities. I can live wherever I want. But I firmly believe in helping and shaping cultures grow progressively. In the case of our struggle, the Filipino struggle, we must be more responsible and help it attain a level that is at par with other cultures. We must not rest until we become a great culture and be one with the whole world, till we can erase all borders, no more rich and poor, no more educated and illiterate, and ultimately, no more races. No more visa problems, these idiotic visas. I am grounded enough to understand that this vision is utopian and it can never be achieved. But art must dream of this vision. Art's ultimate goal is perfection of humanity.

6
Filipino comics

Your films often have rural settings. I know that you grew up in Cotabato, Mindanao, but you have lived in the city, both in Manila and New York, for many years now. Why do most of your films continue to have rural settings?

It's not intentional. Not deliberate at all. I have a lot of stories set in urban milieus, too. It's only that the stories with rural settings or stories with greater rural textures were the ones that were produced first. In fact, I've been trying to do my take on Manila; my Manila story, hopefully next year, after *Heremias* and my East Village, New York City story; there's even a Davao City story and a Zagreb, Croatia story (I've shot some scenes already last December 2004 during the Human Rights Film Festival). *Batang West Side* is Jersey City. *Hesus Rebolusyunaryo* is mostly set in an urban area, even *Burger Boys*. *Ebolusyon* has Manila in it, specifically, Kadyo's story. Well yes, all of these films have more dominant rural textures, albeit they're a mixture of rural and urban localities. The characters especially, my characters, they have very bucolic origins. They have very rural backgrounds, but not necessarily archaic perspectives and traits, as are so often stereotypically pictured in very demeaning, inane movie industry works. I try hard to present as truthfully and honestly as I can real characters with earnest rural pathos and perspectives. My truths or my early truths are very rural; I have a very rural upbringing. It's one of my essential verities, so to speak. When I speak of 'my essential verities,' I'm referring to things that are somehow immutable and inherent in me, acquired and inherited, albeit my temperament, disposition and demeanor now may look so urban. But my being an urbanite is quite underground; I'm afraid I know more of Manila's and New York's proletarian and hardcore underbellies than their so-called modern advancements or superficial adornments and refinements. Personally, I never really make distinctions as to what makes a place urban or rural besides the very obvious like transportations (buffalos and cars), structures (huts and buildings), dresses and manners. I grew up in the middle of a jungle down south, in the middle of poverty, in the middle of strife and struggle, and it's the same when I settled in Manila and New York. These are the same jungles, with poverty, strife and struggle hovering in different incarnations. My films are very personal, so I guess, they come out naturally. My culture is my cinema. I am rural and I am urban. My art comprehends both milieus. My art will struggle to understand both worlds. I am the synthesis. I will be the synthesis. Or, my art is the synthesis. My art will be the synthesis.

Why do you feel that Filipinos abroad have such an affinity or connection with the motherland? (more so I believe, than peoples from other countries)

I'll try to make a cultural dissection here. Culturally, the Philippines is a very displaced society. Displacement plays a major [role] on the migrant Filipino's seeming great fixation to the motherland. I will use the word fixation, instead of affinity or connection, as a point of socio-psychological discourse here. Some may cite nationalism or love of the motherland as key factors here, but that idea seems so broad because inherently so, every Filipino loves the motherland, however there would be levels here depending on one's understanding of the issues of race, of nationhood, of societies, of politics, including one's ideology and economic standing.

Of course, behavioral scientists will have a different view of this. An intellectual may look at these things quite disparately from a common Filipino construction worker in Saudi Arabia. The former would have a succinct discourse on such issues, drawing on conceptual and historical perspectives as practiced and developed by the so-called early great civilizations, as argued and perused by Greek philosophers down to the great contemporary thinkers. On the other hand, the latter would have such an ambiguous notion such that, most often, he can only account for his worries of the family that he is feeding back home, but his act is just as deep as the one who understands the concept of nationhood. Clearly, his concept of nationhood, or being Filipino, begins and ends in his family's struggle, and just being responsible to his family is enough responsibility towards the country. But just the same, the intellectual is also struggling to understand the concept no matter how articulate he is or how eloquent he may be on the issue; a clear perspective on the issue is not measured by a succinct discourse and argumentation. A punk rocker's ranting could be deeper than the polemics of a demagogue. Nobody has a monopoly of the so-called love of country. Fixation is acquired through experience.

Displacement could permeate a vicious injury to the psyche and unfortunately, the Filipino has been inflicted and is afflicted by that injury, an injury that is very physical and psychological; the proletarian Filipino and the bourgeois Filipino have had this injury, without exception, but again on different levels, particularly economically, sociologically, and politically. We have a very long history of displacement. Or rephrasing that: our history, recorded and unrecorded, is a history of displacements. The Filipino culture is replete with displacements, oftentimes directly caused by some of our most common traits.

I'll cite a concrete Filipino trait which effected so much displacement—that of being too embracing of encroachments/trespasses/invasions. We are too embracing, too soft and too trusting of visitors or intruders; the classic 'Filipino hospitality,' they call it. Our cultural landscape is quite unique in this regard. We open our arms and before we know it, we are being colonized and abused. We have had to endure all of this quite passively. Why are we so open to intruders? Why are we so trusting? The archipelagic setup might have had an effect on this as argued by some quarters; the scattering of so many islands offers and creates openness. Or others say it's the tropical weather, the perennial humidity, which encourages perpetual retirements so that whoever comes can just come in; there are no checkpoints, no so-called rigid entry points where a new arrival can be stopped and checked on his tracks? Welcome, find your place in the sand! Or could the *walang pakialam*[7] attitude be the rationale for this? And where did we get this *walang pakialam* attitude? I think there is some truth to the belief that early Filipino Malays had so much—food, gold, vegetation, beaches, and they are so beautiful and gentle that they couldn't care so much about encroachments. Such conditions made them lazy and apathetic and really giving to a fault. Pigafetta, the Spanish diarist/chronicler of the Ferdinand Magellan voyage cited such abundance and beauty of our land and people. In one of his entries, he said about the palm trees: "It could feed a family for a hundred years." There were early pocket resistances, of course; this eventually happened when the abuses or seeming disrespect to 'natives' became intolerable. The first recorded resistance was Datu Lapu Lapu's rejection and eventual butchery of the circumnavigator Ferdinand

7
Literally means "without a care"

Magellan. Check Pigafetta's gory details on this. Gory, man, gory. Before that, some Filipino tribes (the Tausugs of Sulu and Zamboanga, the Maguindanaoans of Cotabato, the Maranaos of Lanao, the Badjaos of Mindanao seas, some Tagalog tribes of Maynila and some Kapampangans of Tarlac) had already been conquered by Islamist Arabs. Weeks before the Mactan debacle, Magellan, fresh from an easy conversion of *Datu* Humabon of Homonhon, had been converting the Cebuanos with the ease of drinking *tuba* (palm wine) and leisurely lying on a white sand beach waiting for a sunset to hide all the rotting fruits and roasted boars and fish, leftovers of endless festivities; Pigafetta even relayed rampant orgies with beautiful Cebuanas as part of their all too easy conquest of our islas. The women, as insinuated by Pigafetta, were regular gifts from the *datus*. Pigafetta's journals were cloaked with sexism and racism and were really bewildering, especially when he kept invoking his faith on some saints and miracles and the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ and God while describing the Cebuana and other Malay women in almost pornographic detail—the skin, the smell, the giggles, the breath, the sensuality of it all; Caligula's romps on flesh would look dull. Man, who can blame the asshole. The archipelago was just too Freudian of a paradise then. It took us more than three hundred years to realize that we needed to be free from this demeaning encroachment. By then, the damage had been all too telling on our psyche—we've become so Vatican and half-baked Castilian. It was a major displacement, a cultural debacle. Then, Roosevelt and the Americans came with their "white man's burden" credo, and again, they got us so easily. At the cost of twenty million pesos, and a grand mock Manila Bay battle to boot, they trampled on us for the whole of the 20th century. There was the bloody hidden war, of course, that killed almost a million Filipinos; it was the Americans' first Vietnam, and, man, until now, they don't want to talk about this and they are still controlling us—politically and economically. That was another major displacement. World War II was another one. It was all too brief, but all too bloody. And then, the other Ferdinand, the very charismatic Marcos led us down the scorching river Styx for twenty-one long and agonizing years. The dark Martial Law period caused a monumental displacement to our psyche. The period institutionalized everything that is so wrong with our system and our culture now.

These displacements have so effectively affected us—from the body politic down to the individual Filipino. And, ultimately, one major effect is the phenomenon of Filipino migration to other shores. The interminability of this sociological phenomenon is more profoundly equated to poverty than to other causes like political asylum, education, artistic pursuits, intermarriages (a big percentage of which is also economically-based) and/or simply, a form of escape. For the poor Filipino, the only escape is the proverbial greener pastures offered by western cultures. Poverty sums up all these displacements, not just economically, but in every aspect of the Filipino's socio-cultural landscape..

And to go back to your question: why do we have such an affinity to the motherland? Why? I believe that the very core of our connectedness is *awa*, translated in Anglo as pity, sympathy, compassion. Every Filipino who lives or who's been in other shores for quite a while is wont to express this. I call this the Pinoy pathos. They would always feel so sorry for the sorry state of the country, for the majority of Filipinos reeling in marginalized conditions in the islands. They'd always express

their helplessness and frustration on the inutile and corrupt system. The oft-repeated lines are "*kawawa naman ang Pilipinas*," "*kawawa naman ang bayan natin*," "*kawawa naman ang mga Pilipino*," "*kailan pa kaya maaayos ang sistema sa atin?*" and "*kailan pa kaya magbabago ang kalagayan ng Pilipino?*" We are a nation in mourning. We are a people that seem cursed to be in perpetual mourning for the motherland. The cross is on every Filipino's shoulder. The struggle, the pain of being Filipino, we carry it everywhere. That connectedness, that love of the motherland, that fixation is borne of displacement. And as a Filipino who's worked and lived in New York, I know the feeling. I am a displaced Filipino, albeit the displacement came early from my Cotabato experience—the Muslim-Christian strife, which destroyed everything we had. I know poverty. I saw it. I experienced it. And like all Filipinos, I dreamt of a better life for my family, of a better Philippines someday. In my experience, cultural dissection became clearer when I accidentally got out of the country in 1992, and later through attending film festivals all over the globe. I observed other cultures and I drew analysis from these observations to dissect our own culture. I am not saying that you cannot conduct a thorough analysis if you're in the Philippines. Outside, it would seem easier because the comparisons would be quite clearer and more concrete, the outside-looking-in psychology, like a looking glass; you're detached, but you see yourself. Because of the seemingly debilitating effects of isolation and geographical detachment, I was somehow forced or I forced myself to be more introspective and self-critical. It's visceral. There'll be answers, there will be questions up front on such fundamental issues of human functions and discipline—work ethics and attitude, the Filipino's idea and concept of time, family values—to geographical attributes like climate (you have wet and dry seasons, while they have winter, spring, summer and fall)and aesthetics (what's your role as an artist, as a Filipino artist? How will your art help shape a progressive culture?). And of course, struggle. You know you're in a different milieu, in unfamiliar terrain, in a different world, in a different culture. Assimilation may be easy, as it has been said that the Filipino is the most assimilable of all Asians (I was quite unsettled when I found a Japanese restaurant in Sweden and it's owned and run by a Filipino couple—a Japanese restaurant in foggy Swedish soil owned by Filipinos!), but there remains a fierce fixation to one's origins; no matter how long the journey, how harsh the struggle in the loneliest of lonely distant shores, the motherland remains the ultimate destination for every Filipino. For most Filipinos in foreign lands, an attitude of transience has become a virtue, a perspective that approximates a level of spirituality, a yearning that liberates them from the burden of exile. They long to be home. And home is the motherland. The motherland is the irreplaceable image of home. That Pinoy pathos is the invisible and uncuttable umbilical cord connecting the Filipino to the motherland.

In general terms, what is it like to work as an artist, particularly in the Philippine context?

I respect other artists' paths and struggles so I can only speak for myself, my own path, my own truth. It's hard and it's cool, man. It's hard because of my chosen aesthetic, but that aesthetic is cool because it is my chosen aesthetic; I'm free, I am not compromising my soul. It's cool because I am, in my own small way, fulfilling my role in our society; I am sharing this gift that I am capable of contributing to this culture.

What are your thoughts on filmmaking today?

With the advent of digital filmmaking, contrary to pronouncements that cinema is dead because of it, cinema is very much alive and has even leapt and advanced to greater and respectable heights. Freedom is the key. Digital freed cinema. The medium is now owned by filmmakers and not controlled by businessmen and idiots. Now we are seeing our own canvases.

You've cited Lino Brocka as an inspiration and a strong influence, but I see deliberate strides in your work and mode of production to go against his legacy of social indictment as well as compromise. Lino did after all make over 70 films, with only a handful responsible for the legacy. Do you feel that history, specifically Filipino filmmakers, have misinterpreted Brocka's legacy?

Brocka's greatness is not on aestheticism if his works [are to] be checked and critiqued earnestly. He never achieved the level of a true cinema aesthete because of his untimely death. Had he lived, I'm sure he could have became one. But his being unable to achieve that stature does not diminish his greatness. His greatness lay in his vision of using the medium to expose his milieu's malaise. And he used it to the hilt. And he is a Filipino hero because of that. But he did compromise [the] majority of his works. We will have to accept that and be honest about it. He was just a human being after all. I read and I heard that he did say that to be able to survive in the Philippine movie industry, he would make five or ten movies for the producer to be able to make one good film for himself. I never knew him personally to really understand such [a] stance. But I am inspired by the persona. He was [a] fighter, a voice and a leader. And I consider *Maynila sa Kuko ng Liwanag* one of the greatest achievements in Philippine cinema.

How difficult is it for you to continue to work as an independent filmmaker in the Philippines today?

It is very difficult on an emotional level because most of the year, I am away from my children; they live in New York and I miss them always. But they understand the struggle; they understand our country's struggle. So, on an emotional level, the words hard, harsh and cruel are an understatement. Add to that, of course, the difficulty of finding funds. I am not being sentimental about this. And I am not romanticizing my condition. I am a vegan; I live alone in a very small oven-like room, no secretaries, no cars, no publicity machine, I only have my books and guitars; I keep everything simple now. I live and make films on grants. It's a choice. I will never be bitter because of this decision. I am a better person because of this decision. Again, I can only speak for myself. This is my path.

Lav Diaz

The Aesthetic Challenge Of 'Batang West Side'

English translation by Noel Vera

Batang West Side, Lav Diaz, 2001

Batang West Side is five hours long

For many this is an issue. A huge issue, and a headache for many here in the Philippines. But not an issue if we remember that there are small and large canvasses; brief ditties and lengthy arias; short stories and multi-volume novels; the haiku and The Iliad. This should be the end of the argument.

It's too long, people can't take it; it's too heavy, people can't handle it; distributors won't pick it up, theaters won't screen it. Wrong. There are theaters that will accept this film. People will watch long films. I believe the masses have the ability to transcend the standards they normally use in apprehending the arts. Allow works of proportion and beauty to exist, and we will develop an audience with philosophies lofty and profound enough to properly appreciate the art of cinema. People will watch and enjoy *Batang West Side*. Theaters will open with this film.

This I firmly believe.

I never intended to make *Batang West Side* five hours long. I simply followed the cutting and joining together of various scenes according to the script I shot. The original script entitled "West Side Avenue, JC" (Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature winner, 1997) was 135 pages long, with 126 scenes. A revised copy (year 2000) that I shot reached a hundred pages and 208 scenes.

I thought the film would run three hours, but during editing I saw that it would run longer and I didn't try to alter this condition; I allowed it to flow naturally. I allowed it to become organic, to acquire a life of its own; this is my philosophy when cutting, when finishing a film. I don't bend to the conventions of editing, or of length; I refused to follow the dictates of industry. There has been no manipulation to force me to conform to tradition, to what has been done before. I've studied the length many times in order to change it, but the five-hour version remains solid—according to the dictates of aesthetics, story flow, and wholeness of vision. I refuse to compromise the integrity of the work to please limiting, emasculating "tradition".

I explained my position to the producers. After many discussions, discourses, and debates that at times led to raised voices and heated arguments, they finally relented, finally believed. They understood that they must not give short shrift to our vision, to abandon our responsibility; that after everything we've gone through and struggled against to finish the film, it would be a great wrong to compromise now. It would be a betrayal of those who sacrificed so much, so long, to compromise—a betrayal of the film, which has acquired a life of its own.

Ever since the introduction of film as the newest, most popular medium of expression, Hollywood has been a tremendous influence on Philippine cinema. Cinema was one of the imperialist tools the Americans brought with them when they bought the Philippines from the Spaniards (or, conversely, when the Spaniards sold the Philippines to them) back in 1898; it quickly became an element of everyday Filipino life. Due to the length of their stay here (they finally left, along with their military bases in 1992), it may safely be assumed that the Filipino sensibility has been thoroughly colonized by America.

And because of this, Filipinos lost the chance to rise by their own bootstraps; colonization wrecked the Filipinos' dream of establishing a nation molded according to the details in their own unique vision. From the perspectives of politics and

history, the Filipinos lost the struggle for freedom—freedom of nationhood, freedom of livelihood and sensibility, freedom of the arts, psychological freedom and freedom of any and every kind—when they were colonized, bought and sold. Add to this the experience of hegemony and war (Japan), dictatorship and terrorism (Marcos)—after all has been said and done, the Filipinos have developed a "loser's culture," the end result of surviving their long and sadly complex history.

It's clear that what is needed is a profound cultural movement to restore this injury.

Cinema can do a great deal towards accomplishing this.

In Hollywood culture, entertainment and profit are the larger purpose of cinema. Entertainment for the audience; profit for the many producers, directors, actors, film workers and movie theater owners. The same holds true in the Philippines. That is why the Filipino's appreciation of cinema is shallow and base. In their eyes, cinema is no different from a carnival. It will take a long and involved process to change this perception, especially with Hollywood films still dominating Filipino theaters.

(Once in a while in Hollywood though, there will emerge someone different, an Orson Welles or John Cassavetes that without fear or hesitation will move against the flow of things. If ever there was a vivid or incendiary flash of integrity in the art of filmmaking in Hollywood from then until now, it was Welles and Cassavetes.)

Most Hollywood films are ninety minutes or a hundred minutes long, rarely more than two hours. We have become used to this convention, this belief, that cinema should be so long, and no more. This has become the standard measurement of theater owners and producers, so that more people can come and watch per day, and the grosses can consequently be higher.

The Blockbuster Culture / The Garbage Culture

Hollywood developed the blockbuster culture, the profit culture.
It's only right to admire a profitable film because the cost of filmmaking is so high. It's only right that there are businessmen in film—they are an important part of the industry.

No illusions

The film has no illusions of heroism. We have no intention of bragging that we are special. We simply wish to contribute to the development and growth of the long awaited new direction of Philippine Cinema. We wish to help (even just a little) in its overthrow, and ultimate change.

At the same time, we are also unafraid to create a different impression among people; it's all part of the process. The Philippines has been left too far behind in world cinema (meaning not Hollywood but WORLD CINEMA, where there can be found the startling new works of Iranian and Taiwanese filmmakers). It is a new age, and we need courage to innovate and create. We need to begin developing a National Cinema, a cinema that will help create a responsible Filipino people.

That is the vision that inspired *Batang West Side*.

It's not just the length. Some will express surprise (or express more fitting if less printable sentiments) at various elements of this film, especially the use of digital video reshot on a TV monitor to 'dirty' the footage—to create lines, crudity, a roughened appearance. The damaged texture is a metaphor for damaged illusions, a rebuke of the long-held belief by the Philippine movie industry that a film has to be clean and polished to be fit for public screening. Not only is this movie not clean or polished, eighty percent of the film was shot with available light only.

Radical

A film this long is radical for Filipino sensibilities, even down to the "damaged" texture and story structure, "radical" because this is something totally new to them. Only a radical sensibility can provoke the longed-for change in Philippine Cinema. Only through such a sensibility can Philippine Cinema acquire the proper vision, be made whole. Only thus can Philippine Cinema, long-pronounced "dead," be resurrected once more.

Culture

Batang West Side is hard to take at first glance, if our basis for watching is the culture and rhetoric of Philippine Cinema.

The habit or convention of watching films constitutes a culture of its own, meaning there is an experience, a whole tradition, a perspective of an entire community or society, a sensibility created that has become characteristic of individuals in that society.

This is the objective of *Batang West Side*—the examination of the Filipino consciousness. Why are the Philippines the way they are now? The Filipino people? Philippine cinema? This aesthetic goal can be achieved through analysis of the comprehensive form (length/structure/appearance) and context (word/flesh/vision) of this film, and of other films to come. Let's not be contained and limited to convention and formula; we need to probe and probe, to explode the wall of corruption. The perspective is ever historical, and ever advancing.

Change

Ultimately, the objective of *Batang West Side* is simple—change. Whoever wishes to hinder this film is an enemy of change. Whoever is an enemy of change is an enemy of Philippine Cinema.

Manila, December 2002

Lav Diaz

Our Death, In Memoriam

IV

Published in *KINO!* 2/3, Summer 2007

In November 30, 2006, super typhoon Reming (international name: Durian) struck the Philippines killing hundreds of people and burying villages around the Mayon volcano area in the Bicol region. Nine hours of relentless heavy rain and wind caused harrowing deaths and destruction. Volcanic debris, boulders, sand and mudflows covered the once verdant and serene place. The sight of the aftermath was apocalyptic. The typhoon was the strongest to hit the Philippines in living memory.

Two weeks before the typhoon struck, I wrapped the four-month shoot of *Heremias Book Two* in the very same places that the typhoon destroyed. A good part of *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* was also shot there three years ago. I've become so attached to the place. I didn't realize the magnitude of the devastation till I had gained enough courage to visit the place a week later. The places where we shot scenes were all in ruins; the roads were gone, the houses were either buried or torn to pieces, structures collapsed. It was unbelievable; horrifying. Gloom and sorrow were all over the place. The smell of death was hovering in every corner, even in sleep and in dreams. You could hear hapless wails in the dead of the night, names being screamed and cried out. People were digging, or just walking aimlessly, looking for loved ones; people were burying loved ones; people were going insane; people were numbed by so much pain. And help was late in coming. The system is so neglectful and so corrupt. I got hold of my camera and with the help of two, three friends living in the area, I started shooting I don't know what yet then. A documentary? Maybe just a recording, a reportage (For whom? For myself? I just felt I had to do something,)? I just started interviewing and shooting. After a week of frenzied and relentless shoot, I watched the footage. And I decided to write a story. I decided to make a film, a memoriam, and share it to the world; share our grief. It's the only thing I can do and contribute to all the madness. I created three characters and just like in my last shoots (*Ebolusyon* and *Heremias Book Two*), I reckoned, the process would be very organic. I will write the story as we shoot; do *improv* method; we will discover things through the process. And so, for the next five weeks, we were shooting nonstop in the most devastated areas, specifically the village of Padang. Padang is Pompeii. In one sweep, water, sand and boulders rolled down the volcano and the village is gone. I wrote scripts/dialogue/instructions before a scene was shot. I invited three theater actors, a painter and local non-actors to play the parts. Three local friends became the crew and staff. A friend's house became our production house. The shoot was both harrowing and liberating for us. It was always raining. We wept, embraced whatever sorrow can give us, we can't help it; actors were breaking down; we had had discourses of what happened but most of the time, individually, we struggled in silence trying to reconcile everything. One actor, a medium, could actually see the suffering spirits. We were shooting over buried houses, over dead bodies. We were purging our own demons. It was a journey into the deepest melancholia of existence.

The film's discourse is on the death of beauty, death of aesthetics, how things can turn ugly. I borrow Rainer Maria Rilke's line from his *Duino Elegy I*: "Beauty is the beginning of terror." How true and honest.

The great and beautiful Mayon Volcano is a metaphor for the argument. Mayon is the only volcano in the world with the most perfect cone. The resilient locals, called Bicolanos, refer to it as Daragang Magayon (beautiful maiden). On a sunny or clear day, the sight of Mayon is just majestic, perfect and heavenly in all angles. On a cloudy day, you would long and wait for her to peek from within the cumulus covers. But it is also one of the deadliest, if not the deadliest, volcanoes in the planet. In 1814, during the Spanish era in the Philippines, it unleashed its havoc and buried the surrounding towns with rocks and lava. The memory of that event still haunts the locals. They continue to tell stories, myths and legends about the event. Artists continue to be inspired and create works from the memory. They have a beautiful park, called Cagsawa, created from the ruins to remind them always. And in an ironic twist, Mayon just simply destroyed the park that is so faithfully dedicated to her beauty. Beauty rears its ugly head, so to speak, killing those who prepare the `makeup and production design'. Or, the pursuit of aesthetics can be very devastating and horrifying, e.g. Vincent Van Gogh, or think of Kurt Cobain and Mark Chapman, great metaphors on the irony of the pursuit for aesthetics.

The story that grew and evolved during the six-week-shoot revolves on the return of the great Filipino poet, Benjamin Agusan, to his birthplace, Padang, now buried. He was in Russia, in an old town called Kaluga, the past seven years, living there on a grant and a residency, taught and conducted workshops in a university. He kept writing poetry; published two books of sadness and longing in the process. He was shooting video collages, fell in love with a Slavic beauty, buried a son, and almost went mad. He came back to bury his dead—father, mother, sister and a lover. He came back to confront some issues, to face secrets, to heal wounds, or create more wounds. He came back to face Mayon, the raging beauty and muse of his youth. He came home to confront the country that he so loved and hated, the Philippines. He came back to die. In the backdrop are his friends, nemesis and a son. His return is an aesthetic journey.

Kagadanan sa banwaan nig mga Engkanto (*Death in the Land of Encantos*), Lav Diaz, 2007

Lav Diaz

Poems For Benjamin Agusan

Poems from *Kagadanan sa Banwaan ning mga Engkanto* (*Death in the Land of Encantos*, 2007)
English translations by Paula Maria Diaz, with Bayani de Leon

V

Notes:
* Tasyo is the philosopher character in Philippine hero Jose Rizal's novel *Noli Me Tangere*.
** Sisa is the mad woman/mother in *Noli Me Tangere*.
*** Alimuom is the heat that comes off the ground after a rainfall.

Dagli ang pagbuhos at dagli ang pagtila
Dagli ang pagdating at dagli ang paglayo
Alimuom na sumibol sa pangako ng umaga
Nawala bago magtanghaling tapat sa labis na paninibugho
Sa mga anghel ng mundo at ng langit at ng purgatoryo at ng demonyo
Ginalugad mo ang kahabaan ng ilog ng mga tatsulok na di mabuo-buo
Sa kamalayang hindi mapakali sa mga agos at alon at likong nagbabago-bago
Sisa ka ng disyerto at Tasyo kang namimilosopo sa unibersong nagsisinto-sinto
Sa mga lima-singkong kaisipang pinamana at ibinuhos ng luma at kontemporaryong panahon.
Paslit ka pa nang narating nila ang buwan
Bata ka pa nang may tumubong bundok sa lawa ng bayan
Nakikita mo araw-araw ang langit at lupa, ang langit at impiyerno
Walang nang sulok ang mundo, walang nang masusulingan ang tao
Lulubog-lilitaw at sanlaksang alingawngaw
May dugo sa bintana ng dalagang nawala
Inaabot ang bituin sa tuktok ng mangga
Paslit ka pa nang mahulog ang bisita
Bata ka pa nang may pinagpapatay sila
May awit na mahiwaga, nagpipilit sa alaala
May naaaninag kang mukha, dating pag-aalala
Ang dating putikan ay ginawa nang kalsada
Minaso ang bundok at ginawang graba
Saka inilibing nila ang mahal mong kababata.
Tumutol ka man ay umuugod ka na
Nalagas na ang iyong lakas, nawala na ang sigla
Ang hawak mong panahon ay isa na lamang hawla
Lipas na ang sarsuela, wala nang natutuwa
Pilit mong pinalalaya ang itinatagong sumpa
Sa daungan ng mga isda, doon ka tumutula
Naroon ang metapora, naroon ang hiwaga
Sa himlayan ng mga sugapa, doon ka kumakanta
Kasayaw mo ang baylarena, hawak mo ang baywang niya
Sa laot ng gabi kapag papauuwi ka na
Bumubulong ang hangin, nakatingin ang mga bituin
Kumakaway ang kahoy, may kung anong panaghoy
Tumitigil ang daloy, daan ay hindi matukoy
Titigil ka sa tabi, iihi sandali
Init ay kakawala, salimuot mula sa lupa
Huhugot ka ng buntunghininga
Wala na talaga
Alam mong ika'y nagkasala
Alam mong nabibilang na ang araw mo sa lupa.
Walang dakila
Walang bayani

Relenting as suddenly as it pours
Departing as suddenly as it arrives
Rancid air burgeoning from morning's promise
Dispersed before noon out of keen jealousy
At the angels of earth and heaven and purgatory and the devil
You roamed the far-reaching river of triangles unable to complete themselves
In a consciousness made restless by torrents and waves and ever shifting curves
You're Sisa of the desert and Tasyo spinning philosophy in a universe playing half-wit
To five-cent minds bequeathed and poured over by eras old and new
You were a tyke when they reached the moon
You were a kid when a mountain grew from the town lake
Daily you see land and sky, heaven and hell
No corner left in the world, no haven for everyone
A hundred thousand echoes will sink and rise
Behold the blood on the window of a vanished maiden
Angling for the star atop a mango tree
You were a tyke when the chapel fell
You were a kid when murders proliferated
A mysterious song persists in memory
A face from the past being glimpsed
A once muddy place turned into a street
The mountain pounded and crushed into gravel
Before burying your childhood friend
You protested in vain, but you're hobbled
Your strength sapped, your vigor lost
Time in your hands is merely a cage
Zarzuela out of vogue, amusing no one
You seek to release the hidden curse
You recite poetry down the shoals where the fishes are
Alas a metaphor, alas a mystery
You sing in the abode of addicts
You dance with a ballerina, grasping her by the waist
On your way home in the deep of night
The wind whispers, the stars look down
The branches shake, some wailing in the air
The currents cease, the road not discernible
You will stop by the wayside and piss momentarily
And heat will be released, swirl upward from the soil
You will heave a sigh
Nothing is left
You know you have sinned
You know your days on earth are numbered
No one's honorable
No one a hero

Walang kriminal
Walang santo
Walang kawawa
Walang himala
Walang timawa
Walang mariwasa
Walang kaluluwa
Walang alaala
Wala nang alaala
Wala
Walang kumakawala.
Gumagapang ka sa dagat ng mga alaala na ayaw lumaya sa piitan ng iyong pag-iisa.
Ibinabalik ka sa mga hiningang humulagpos sa sinapupunan pa man
Inihahatid ka sa hardin na naluoy bago pa man yumabong
Inililuklok ka sa panahong nagtaglagas bago nagtagsibol
Inihihimlay ka sa mundo ng sigwa, unibersong hindi mapayapa
Wala
Wala nang papawi sa pait ng iyong bawat paglingon
Wala nang paparam sa lalim ng lungkot ng bawat imaheng dumadapo sa iyong balintataw.

No one a criminal
No one a saint
No one miserable
No miracle
No one poor
No one rich
No soul
No memory
No more
No more memory
None
No escape
You grovel in the ocean of memories refusing to flee from the prison
of your solitude
Returning you to breaths that expire while in the womb
Ferrying you to a garden that withers before it blooms
Placing you in a season that becomes autumn before springtime
Laying you down in a world of tempests, a universe that cannot be pacified
None
None can assuage the bitterness of your every turn
None can take away the profound grief of every saintly image that falls on
the center of your eye.

Paalam (Haiku)

Balot ang lungsod
Ng puting alapaap
Malayong musa.
Haplos ng ambon
Anino mong nagdaan
Naaaninag.
Hampas ng ulan
Lihim na kalungkutan
Pananambitan.
Taghoy sa gabi
Dahon kang naglalayag
Sa panaginip.
Rosas sa pader
Gumagapang na lungsod
Nangungulila.
Patlang sa buwan
Nakaguhit mong anyo
Sa kalawakan.
Dalit ng hangin
Pangamba ng taglamig
Isang paglisan.
Gintong panahon
Hiram na kapalaran
Pamamaalam.
Paalam.

Farewell (Haiku)

The city wrapped
In immaculate clouds
Muse from afar.
Soothed by a drizzle
Your fleeting shadow
Now discerned.
Pelting of rain
Sorrow concealed
A plaint.
Lament in the night
You're a leaf cruising
On a dream.
Rose on a wall
City supine in its gait
Feeling alone.
A gap on the moon
Your semblance inscribed
On the vastness above.
Ushered by the wind
Fear of cold's grip
A turning away.
Golden season
Borrowed fate
Bidding farewell.
Farewell.

Bahay ng Rosas

May haplit ng pagyuko ng mga puno ng taglagas
Sa tudla ng aking tingin sa kalawakan ng langit
Kumirot sa aking tadyang ang paghulagpos ng buto
Hudyat ng pagsisimula ng mga oyayi't dalit
Aawit tayo sa gabing yakap ka ng niyebeng kristal
Kahimanawaring lambungan ng himig ang iyong hapis
Hahagkan ko ang pisngi mong sa kalauna'y lalamig
Naghahanda na ako sa panahon ng pananangis.
Magtatanim ako ng sanlaksang rosas, at parang ng rosas
Puro rosas at pawang mapupulang rosas lamang sa lahat nang sulok at dako
At namumulang rosas lamang sa lahat nang panahon ng ating panahon
Ng ating paghahanda, paghihintay, at pag-aasam
Sa pagdating ng mga paru-paro
Sa pag-ani ng mga bubuyog
Sa paghapon ng mga gagamba
Sa pagdalaw ng mga ibon
Sa pagsulyap ng mga nagdaraan
Sa pagdatal ng iyong kamatayan.

House of Roses

There is a muffled blow when the autumn trees bow
At my viewpoint of the vastness of heavens
My ribs felt the twinge of writhing bones
Forewarning to the start of lullabies and love songs
We shall sing on the night when ice crystals embrace thee
Hoping that the melody may veil thy grief
I shall kiss the cheeks that at once turn icy
Already preparing for the season of lamenting
I shall plant thousand of roses, and fields of roses
Pure roses and seemingly red roses solely on every corner and space
And reddening roses only for all seasons of our seasons
To our preparation, anticipation, and expectation
Of the arrival of butterflies,
the harvest of the bees
the nightly retirement of spiders,
the pilgrimage of birds,
a glimpse of passers-by
and the advent of thy death.

Magdamag sa kawalan
Binasa ko na lahat nang aklat at tula
Hinalukay ang mga litrato
Niyakap lahat nang unan
Kinantot ko ang nagkakalyo kong kamay
Isinuot lahat nang salamin—baka may makita ako
Hinipan ang silindro—baka may marinig ako
Tinipa ang gitara—baka may makapa ako
At waring narinig ko ang tinig mo
Mula sa pantiyon ng mga lumayo
Mula sa sementeryo ng mga naglaho
At kinukutya mo ako sa iyong pagtalikod
At tumawa ka at nakitawa sa mga katulad mong mahina
At walang mga paa
May ilog ng lason sa iniwan mong higaan natin
Naroon pa rin ang mga pating na lumapa sa aking kalanguan
Hinihigop ako ng kumunoy sa bawat dantay ng aking likod
Sa mga tinik ng iyong pakikipaglaro sa aking pagpipikitmata
At pagbubulag-bulagan
Sa sahig nakatihaya ang mga sinsilyo at barya
Ng iba't ibang bayang aking narating
Nagniniig tayo sa piling nila tuwing ako'y dumarating
Mainit at maalab ang pagitan ng iyong mga hita
Habang nakalublob ako sa pangungulila at pagwawalang-bahala
Lumulusong ako at paulit-ulit tayo
Winawasak ang bawat isa sa bawat hampas at paglabas
Minamahal ang bawat isa
Hindi mahal ang bawat isa
Bukas ang bintana at sarado ang pintuan
Patay ang ilaw at walang hanging pumapasok sa ating kapusukan
Masarap maglumunoy sa mundo ng kamunduhan
Habang ginigisa tayo sa pag-alpas ng aking tamod at ng iyong tubig
Papahiran kita ng mantika at ibebedyo na nakabukaka
Magmamakaawa ka sa pagbukas ng langit at lupa
Umiiyak ka sa pagsabog ng lahat-lahat mo
Magpapasalamat ka sa pagbuhos ng lahat-lahat mo
Babayo at babayo ako patungo sa kaibuturan mo
Aapuhap ang aking mga kamay sa kung saan-saan mo
May mga daliri ng alupihan at tanikala ng alimango
Sa bawat salungatan ng ating ungol at hiyawan at pagsusumamo
Binubuwal natin ang mga pader at bantayog ng uniberso
Ng panahon nating sa isang iglap ay magiging siphayo.
Pakakasal tayo sa bawat Marso Uno, Mayo Uno at Hunyo Uno
At sa harap ng malalayang puno at malayang mundo

All night long in emptiness
I've read all the books and poems
Dug up the pictures
Cuddled all the pillows
Screwed my own calloused hands
Worn all the spectacles that I might see something
Blown on my harmonica that I might hear something
Plucked my guitar that I might touch something
And it seemed I heard your voice
From the graveyard of those who have fled
From the burial ground of those who have vanished
And you were mocking me as you turned back
And you laughed and snickered with weaklings like you
And those without feet
There's a river of venom on our bed that you abandoned
Where the sharks that consumed my stupor still lie
Where a quicksand will suck me in every time my back rests
On the thorns of your wagering over the shutting of my eyes
And my playing blind
Change and coins are scattered all over the floor
Of many countries I've been to
We rendezvous with them every time I come
The insides of your thighs will be burning hot
While I'm steeped in loneliness and indifference
I will be treading downward and we will keep doing this
Destroying each other at every thrust and release
Loving each other
Not loving each other
The window is open and the door is locked
The light is off and no air drifts into our passion
How sweet to wade in the world of carnality
While we get stewed in the rush of my semen and your juice
I will rub oil on you and angle your legs apart
You will beg at the opening of heaven and earth
Weep over the explosion of all in you
You will wax grateful for the outflow of all in you
I will pound and pound going into your depths
Grope around in all of you
There will be centipede fingers and crab chains
In every clashing of our moans and screaming and pleading
We are tearing down the walls and monuments of the universe
Of our time that will melt abruptly into disillusion
We will wed on every first day of March, May, and June
And before the unbound trees and the liberated world

Mag-iisang-dibdib tayo sa harap ng palayang naghihintay
(sa hunyangong ermitanyo)
Ng mga himig ng maya at pag-ibig
Hawak-kamay tayong haharap sa bundok at bulkan at hihingi
Ng tubig ng pag-ibig
Ng dalit ng pag-ibig
Tatahimik ang lungsod at lansangan sa ating mga tawag
Malulunod sa karagatan ang mga ilog ng ating dugo
Isang pangarap ang nawala sa buhos ng unos
Sa dagan at dagundong ng mga batong dumausdos
Umalimpuyo ang kalangitan sa katanghalian
At tumakas ang pag-asa sa ating mga palad
Umapaw ang baha sa luha ng binubuo nating aklat
Ni hindi ako nakapagpaalam sa isang pangako
Di ko na rin nakita ang nakatago mong anino
Napakalawak ng iniwan mong diskurso
Sa aking katinuan at katalinuhan ng mundo
Naging mangmang ang mga insekto at henyo
Ng tinatawag nilang sikolohiya ng pag-ibig at emosyon ng babae.
Nasaan si Sigmund Freud sa pag-apaw ng panaginip at kalibugan mo?
Gayung gumugol din ako ng panahon sa pilosopiya at siyensya?
Ayokong hawakang muli muna ang nasa pagitan ng aking mga hita
Habang natitiis ko pa ang sakunang inabot ng ating mundo
Habang nababata ko pa ang sakunang dinaranas ng bayan ko
Hindi ko na yata kailangan sina Socrates at Hesu Kristo
Sa panahon ng pagsasakripisyong ganito
Wala nang pretensyoso at gago sa panahong nagsasalpukan ang galit at lungkot
Wala nang loko-loko at tarantado sa panahong inililibing nang buhay ang mundo
Wala nang bobo at matalino sa panahong naglalaho na ang bayan ko
Wala nang santo at salamangkero sa pakikipagtalo ko kay Satanas
Putang-ina nilang lahat na nagkumpromiso ng sining ko!
Mga hayup silang lahat na nagkanulo sa sining ko!
Aahon si Tasyo sa anumang hampas ng bato sa kanyang bungo!
At sa wakas ay nabago ang anyo ng kuwarto
May mga bagong aklat at kuwaderno
May bagong gitara at bagong silindro
Punit-punit na ang mga litrato
At itinapon ko sa basura ng ating kahangalan
Siyam na metal ang itinali sa dibdib ng Adan
May inihahandang pelikula sa gitna ng sangandaan
May pagbabago, may mga bagong tao, may mga bagong tatao
May mga bagong mukha
May mga bagong likha
May bagong musa
May bagong pinto
May bagong kuwarto

We will join in marriage before rice fields waiting
(for hermit chameleons)
For the songs of the sparrow and love
With clasped hands we will face toward the mountain and volcano and will ask
For the water of your love
For the psalm of your love
The city and its streets will fall silent at our behest
The rivers of our blood will plunge into the ocean
One dream lost in the torrential storm
And in the heaviness and rumbling of the sliding stones
At midday whirlwinds rage in the heavens
And hope loosens from our hold
A flood of tears overflows across the books that we are making
I have not even bidden farewell to a promise
Nor have I glimpsed your hidden shadow
You have left behind a vast discourse
On my sanity and the Earth's intelligence
Grown witless are insects and masters
Of what they call psychology of love and female emotion
Where's Sigmund Freud during the brimming of your dream and lust?
Although I've also spent time in philosophy and science
I'm not inclined to probe the hollows of my thighs
As long as I can endure the terrible fate that has befallen our world
As long as I can bear the misfortune that's burdening my country
It seems I don't need Socrates and Jesus Christ
In this time of sacrifice
No more pretenders and morons when anger and grief collide
No more lunatics and rascals when the world is being buried alive
No more half-wits and smartasses when my country is fading
No more saints and magi in my altercations with Satan
To hell with them all who have cheapened my art!
All of them animals who have betrayed my art!
Tasyo shall rise with every rock that raps his skull!
And at last the look of the room has changed
There are new books and notebooks
There are new guitars and harmonicas
Pictures torn into pieces
That I tossed into the bin of our insanity
Adam had nine metals stitched to his ribs
A movie is being filmed by the crossroads
There are changes, new people, new characters.
New faces
New creations
New muse
New door
New room

May bagong lalaruin ang hintuturo
May bagong pagitan na papasukin ko
May bagong diskurso
May bagong alimpuyo
May bagong pag-ibig at panibugho.
Nagpadala ako ng sulat sa isang kaibigan
Sinabi kong hindi ako darating sa usapan
'Patawad' sabi ko
Hindi ko pa matanggap ang kalungkutan ko
Pinipilit ko pang tanggaping sa pagkawala niyang ito
Ay hindi ko na siya hahanaping muli.

New hobby for index fingers
New alleys that I can enter
New discourse
New vortex
New love and jealousy
I sent a letter to a friend
Where I said I won't make it to our appointment
'Forgive me' I implored
I haven't come to grips with my sorrow
Still forcing myself to deal with her absence
And I've no desire to find her again.

Sampung Istasyon Patungong Impiyerno

Ang marubdob niyang pag-iipon ng mga butil sa garapon noon
Upang mapunan lamang ang paglayo ng kanyang amang at inang
Gaya nang namumuong siphayo sa kanyang puso ngayon
Isang pagtatangka na maaari pa niyang baguhin ang kanyang anyo
Subalit ang buntot niya'y patuloy na tumutubo
At nagkakabalahibo ang sungay niya
At tumatalas sa bawat baghigpit ng pulupot ng ahas
Sa kanyang katinuang gago
Hindi na siya makakabalik sa batuhang dalampasigan
Malayo na ang mundo ng kanyang kamusmusan
Inuuod na ang uniberso ng mga ninunong nalimutan
Bilog na ang mga tao sa lahat nang bakuran
Wala nang ulo ang mga asong nauulol sa kanilang kalanguan
Lunod ang sementeryong paglilibingan ng buong bayan.

Ten Stations to Hell

The heartfelt gathering of grains in a jar back then
Solely to replace the departure of his father and mother
Like the gloom that is now forming in his heart
An attempt that he might still be able to change his form
However, his tail continues to grow
His fur emerges
His horns become sharper the tighter the snake squeezes its coil
On his deranged vision
He can never return to the rocky seaside
The land of his innocence is now far away
Maggots reign the universe of forefathers long forgotten
Every person has become round behind every fence
Mad dogs have lost theirs heads in their drunkenness
The cemetery where the whole country will be buried is already drowning.

Batang West Side, Lav Diaz, 2001

Dodo Dayao & Mabie Alagbate

Beer And Brocka

VI

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Transcription by Kristine Kintana

Ebolusyon ng isang pamilyang Pilipino (*Evolution of a Filipino Family*), Lav Diaz, 2004

Lav Diaz, Kidlat Tahimik, Khavn de la Cruz and Raya Martin in conversation about Lino Brocka.

August, 2009. Somewhere in Quezon City. Four renowned Philippine directors meet in a bar. Soon the discussion embarked down memory lane on the director who is considered as Philippine Cinema's irrefutable icon, Lino Brocka.

Lav Diaz (LD): It is undeniable: Brocka is the most influential Filipino filmmaker. That's a given, nobody can top that.

Raya Martin (RM): I am not a big fan. He lacks this quality of timelessness.

Khavn de la Cruz (KC): I like what I've seen of his work. I saw them first on TV the same way I saw all those B-movies. And for the most part, they were the same to me. Chiquito, Lito Lapid, Lino Brocka. I liked them all. *Ang Tatay Kong Nanay* (*My Father Is My Mother*) did stand out, even back then. But when I made a list of my favourite films way back, he wasn't there. Maybe I deliberately didn't put him in. Everyone talks about Brocka anyway.

LD: But he's up there. Even if you don't like his aesthetic. Even if you don't like his work. He is the most recognized name in Philippine cinema, nobody else.

RM: He's important, but he's very dated. He spoke about his time, during his time, which was his edge. I feel his activism, but I see him as an artifact. I'm not a fan of his structure. Very commercial, very narrative.

KC: Classical.

RM: I liked *Maynila: Sa Mga Kuko Ng Liwanag* (*Manila: In the Claws of Light*).

KC: I'm not sure if I read the novel before seeing *Manila: In the Claws of Light* or maybe it was the other way around, but both had an impact on me personally. I was very young and very impressionable. I didn't know or didn't care that it won awards and all that. He became part of my consciousness without me being conscious of it. Did you know him personally, Lav?

LD: No. I was just a fan. But I've seen him in person, never met him. I was a reporter for "Daily Mirror", and there was this drivers' strike. Lino was there with Behn Cervantes [actor, director, and close friend of Lino Brocka], supporting the strikers in Cubao. Lino was very charismatic, and people tended to follow him.

KC: But you went to school with him, right, Kid?

Kidlat Tahimik (KT): I did. In the early '60s, Lino and I and Behn Cervantes were taking up Speech and Drama at the UP [University of the Philippines]. We weren't exactly the top of our class. But we were active in the Drama Club. Behn Cervantes and I graduated in 1963. Lino almost graduated, but I think he was missing a few courses.

RM: Lino didn't march?

KT: It wasn't that big a deal if you marched or not. After that year, Behn and Lino ended up in Hawaii, I think. Lino worked as a volunteer in a leprosarium, and Behn was an East West Center scholar, something like that. I didn't see Lino for a long, long time. I went to Paris to work for the next five years, and I came home in 1970. After my stint as a serious economist in Paris, I saw the light, my own duende jumped out of its cocoon and I became an artist. Lino had a small two-room apartment. And he lent Katrin, my wife, and me the other room, where he had all his laundry, and we would sleep under the ironing board. And that was where we got to know each other better. I mean, back in college, it was all classrooms and plays but we never interfaced as artists.

KC: Plays? Were you acting then?

KT: Yes, sometimes, acting, sometimes part of the stage crew. I don't think Lino was directing. It was Behn. We were involved in plays that Behn directed.

KC: Was he making films when you were staying with him?

KT: Lino was actually trying to break away from the film industry, because he was compromising too much. The script for *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* (*Weighed But Found Wanting*) was ready but he couldn't find a producer. And there I was, this wannabe filmmaker, with my Bolex camera. But I felt I wasn't ready yet. But having come from Wharton, I had all these MBA connections, my classmates there heard I wanted to do a film. Over beers, Christian Monsod and Vic Puya—I forgot who the other guys were—told me, "If you're doing a film, we might come in, not as big investors, but what they call poker money." I thought, "Why not introduce them to Lino Brocka?" And so I put together a meeting and they formed CineManila. It was 1974, and *Weighed But Found Wanting* was a big success.

KC: There were anecdotes about how he treated his crew, right? That he was very humane in treating them.

RM: Yes, especially because he came from theatre.

LD: They do curse like hell in theatre. Some of them can be very brutal. That's always been the culture, and some do it until today.

KC: Lino was a victim of that. You know about that anecdote?

LD: Yeah, he was always being ordered around.

KC: It was hardcore back then. There was no restroom, so the guys had to pee in jugs on the second floor. Then, Lino had to bring those jugs downstairs, clean it up then bring it back upstairs.

RM: Really? He went through that?

KC: Because he was from the province, right? From lead actor to urine specialist. He was also anxious about being pitted against Kidlat.

KT: What happened was, several years before that, I was getting messages that there were people badmouthing me.

LD: There was a rumor that you were claiming most of Philippine Cinema was shit. It was all bullshit. And when it got to Lino …

KT: Lino grew distant because he believed the rumors, that's where I got hurt. I had allegedly claimed to be the only significant Filipino filmmaker, and the rest of Philippine Cinema was trash. What I really said was, that the Philippines is the third biggest film industry in the world after India and Hollywood, we were making close to 200 movies a year and you can forget most of those films. But watch for Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, Mike De Leon. I always said that.

RM: Wasn't there also a rumor that you were in Berlin, and Lino was in Cannes, and Lino wasn't allowed to screen in Berlin?

KT: It's possible. There's always been this rivalry between Berlin, Cannes and Venice. The big three. As a matter of fact, when I attended Berlin, that was the last summer festival. Berlin was always in June. It was the best time. But Berlin was a little pissed because, coming after Cannes, they mostly got leftovers.

KC: Is that why they try to go first now?

RM: It's a big dilemma for filmmakers. You want to go to Berlin, of course, but Cannes had the

added cachet of prestige. And none of them will take their screenings to each other. So if I want Cannes badly, I'll just bypass everything, but at the same time, it's a big risk, too. It forces filmmakers into a corner really.

KT: But I'm glad I was able to clear that out in Telluride in 1983. That was the time that I was with [Andrej] Tarkovskij, his wife, and others. Lino and I stayed in the same cottage so we got to talk about a lot of things. I was able to clarify what I've always said. This was also right after the assassination of Ninoy [Benigno Aquino] so talk turned to politics a lot. Lino he was very angry, and I was upset, too, but not as passionate as Lino was.

KC: During his time, there was a clear enemy. Today, it's more ambiguous. As a post-Brocka filmmaker, in a way, my films are sort of reactionary. His stories are straightforward, mine are vague. He has a coherent agenda, my films don't necessarily have any. I've seen docus about Brocka, he's the kind of passionate ideologue we don't see too much around these days. There's a resignation to my films, they're not so much asking questions and settling for particular answers. What were the instances when you were compared to Brocka?

RM: Our films get compared in the sense that I talk about nationalism, history. And Brocka's films are very much about sociopolitical issues, which I also touch on. But aesthetically, many see me as an anti-Brocka, because I don't make films about slums, poverty, corruption. That's how the country is misrepresented in festivals, very under-developed, very backward. That's the Brocka legacy, if you will. For better or worse. That's what I meant when I said his films aren't timeless. He wasn't interested in looking forward or back. He was all about looking at what was happening at the present, his present. It was a very different political climate, repressed mass media. My generation has this removed from everything that's happening. And as a filmmaker, I wanted to go back to the root of why we are this way before tackling anything else. I'm not even going to attempt to go into Brocka territory because that's not what we need at this point. What we do need more of is to regain the Brocka spirit, not his aesthetic.

KC: Brocka wasn't just about the now, though he made a film called *Now*. He also delved into history with pieces like *Dung-Aw*, *Santiago*, *Tadhana* [Reform Movement episode].

LD: I've done nothing that's in any way like Brocka. Our aesthetics are different, but I've paid homage. In *Ebolusyon Ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* (*Evolution of a Filipino Family*), I created a character based on him. Lino never broke away from structure, formula. Beginning, middle, end. Narrative thread, character-driven. And very rarely you get a happy ending from him. That's where his aesthetics come to play, I think. But I never saw him as having an aesthetic but more of having a stance, he was very political. That bleak ending is the primary characteristic of his work. That's his most overt deviation from the mainstream. Sometimes he'd give in, in his commercial work. But his best work—it's very dark. Although Ricky Lee did mention lately that near his death, Lino had found a way to let a little happiness in his work.

KC: Philippine cinema's presence on the world map owes a lot to Brocka but in world cinema, his presence today seems very marginal, almost non-existent. I was in a festival some time back and namedropping Brocka to a group of filmmakers but I drew nothing but blank stares.

RM: Brocka's a blessing and a curse. He's a blessing to filmmakers for paving the way. We're like Hollywood, very domestic. He helped us look outside. But his films inadvertently misrepresented the country in the world's eyes. The qualities he exoticized—poverty, underdevelopment—had become our identity, not only cinematically but as a nation. That's the curse.

LD: I would disagree that he paved the way. *Maynila* influenced me as an artist. I became a filmmaker because of it. But to say that he laid the roads for us—there's no such thing in art.

RM: I think the importance of Brocka was his political voice. His views, of course, were colored, propagandistic, arguable. But he captured the spirit, the struggle and showed it to the rest of the world. He also believed we could change things and he said so, told us how. That was equally important.

LD: Lino lived in a very different time. You have to think about the digital age and the Internet, that's totally different. And we have a very apathetic culture now. This government is wreaking havoc and we're still out having coffee. It's sad. The discourse has stayed an aesthetic one. And maybe that's how it should be.

KC: What about the Brocka-Bernal rivalry?

LD: Brocka and Ishmael Bernal were very different. But they were apparently keeping tabs on each other's work. There was really something. But looking closer you have to ask—why were they fighting? Their aesthetics were wildly different from each other. It was more a case of clashing egos, I think. They just happened to be at the forefront of their generation. Kidlat had taken a different path from both of them.

RM: I'm miffed about that. Because Brocka was considered the only legit filmmaker at that time, it was as if his word was king. That the spotlight shone too brightly on him eroded the significance of so many other better filmmakers during his time. Like Bernal. Kidlat, of course, but Kidlat moved to the beat of a different drum, so to speak, so you can't lump him in with the others, he was never really part of the studio system. But Mike De Leon, Celso Ad Castillo, Joey Gosiengfiao.

KT: I never felt in competition with Lino, because we're in such different genres. I was very happy when he got into all these festivals.

RM: Cannes played a big part. Also, he was very visible because he existed outside of film, he was in theater, he was being distributed internationally, and he was also an activist, on the news. The hype. The recognition. It's more about that than aesthetics, really. People don't really care about the films. Same with today. You can look at Brillante Mendoza and see parallels. The culture is different with regard to watching films. His films won't make as much money as Brocka's did. But the attention keeps him visible, and more than that, significant. There's no room for discourse. It's like a canonization of sorts.

KT: I had to admire Lino, how he survived the demands. You know he's a real artist, and he was not just churning out film after film. He was trying to inject social consciousness, even when he was working with terrible material. And he was consistent in that. He also eats with the crew, unlike other directors who just eat with the stars.

KC: What are your favorite Brocka works?

RM: I liked *Maynila* only. I'm not a fan of *Insiang*, or *Orapronobis*, or *Jaguar*. Not really, because somehow it became a sort of template. For me, *Maynila* is his template for socio-realist cinema, but it's the most flexible. Whereas, the others were really strictly boxed in a structure of that tradition. I get his importance, but I'm really not a fan. Like in a family, he's that important uncle that you always greet with respect, but you don't necessarily care about him.

LD: *Maynila* was such a huge influence on me. I saw that 1975. Our Literature teacher in Ateneo told us to watch the film and then make a paper. Cinema was just entertainment to me back then, no aesthetic issues yet. It's just a movie. So we went there, I was in first year college. It was a shock, seeing the film. Wow! Powerful! We were there in Coronet with my classmates, we were so blown away we had coffee until morning. That was the effect of *Maynila* on me. It stayed with me. I saw it and something woke up in me. It was

the height of the Marcos regime then, he was controlling everything. And *Maynila* was liberating, in a sense that you can use this medium to fuck this regime. Of course, before that, *Weighed But Found Wanting* was also shown but I didn't get to see it. *Insiang* was also very influential. Freshman college, that was the first time I learned about it. Not just the film but the filmmaker, this Lino Brocka. *Insiang* was the bar for social realist cinema. That opening shot alone. This was during the martial law period. And it's still here with us, that kind of milieu. *Insiang* was not just talking about the dynamics of a mother-daughter conflict over a man, it's about what poverty can do to you and your psyche. A poverty born of neglect. Of a system that doesn't work for the masses but maintains a status quo. Very feudal. For foreigners, it's so exotic, but we know how it smells like. We have an intimacy with poverty almost. They shot *Insiang* for eleven days, for 800,000 Pesos. It was quite big then, but it was still sort of indie. If you talk about independent cinema, *Insiang* is one such work, a forerunner. Even Lino's CineManila, when he organized that thing, they lost a lot of money, got into disputes, but their perspective never wavered, they clung to this freedom from the clutches of the studio system. We're realizing all this in hindsight, sure. *Insiang* will consistently be among the top five in Philippine cinema history.

KT: I like *Weighed But Found Wanting*. I'm like the spiritual producer of that one because I got them together. I think he had social concern, but he wasn't exoticizing poverty. The small town story was totally free, it was like, the dam broke. And I like his film about the media people and how they manipulate. There's one film with Lorna Tolentino that I like, I can't remember the story anymore. *Maynila* might even be one of his strongest films. For me, it's a different genre from *Weighed But Found Wanting* because that one was based on his hometown memories.

KC: People assume I'm a Brocka fan because of the band [The Brockas], and then I also did *Manila in the Fangs of Darkness*. But it all just started as a joke, a parody. I do come from a tradition of black comedy, satire. Although in a way, it's also paying tribute. Parody's the ultimate homage. For me, Brocka is the ultimate icon of Philippine cinema.

LD: We're just paying homage. We don't really copy him. We just salute him. Like, thank you, for creating models for us to follow.

KT: Raya, you also have a Manila film now, right? [*Manila*, 2009] Was it really your choice to do Bernal's part?

Raya Martin: Actually, that was the joke between Adolfo [Alix, co-director] and myself. Philippine cinema boils down to Brocka vs. Bernal. It's a ridiculous idea, really, so we wanted to do something that's one part inspired by Brocka and another inspired by Bernal and have them duke it out, show their differences, and the need for both of them to exist. Pitting them against each other is absurd.

KC: At least we have something. We're not at ground zero anymore, even Brocka and his contemporaries, they weren't at ground zero. There were others who came first, like Gerardo De Leon and Lamberto Avellana. Brocka just happened to be the most prominent.

LD: How many movies did he make? 69? Out of which there are seven, eight great works.

KC: But his lesser work, the melodramas, are equally important. They were not bad. And they had become part of our psyche.

LD: Lino Brocka is embedded in the culture, you can't escape him. How do we look at Lino now? That's another discourse. We still have the works—although some not in mint condition—so we can watch them and have a more objective discourse on him, his aesthetics. It's clearer 'cause we don't have to build myths around him. Manuel Conde is part of our folklore, our oral history, too. But with Conde, that's because there's nothing to watch anymore. Gerry [Gerardo] De Leon—his best works are gone. He's very good, they say, unfortunately for us, we can only watch *Sanda Wong*. But *Sanda Wong* is just another Chinese movie. *Moises Padilla*—it's all patchwork. But mention his name and it rings with the force of myth. But the work is gone, out of neglect, out of a lack of an archival perspective. We're orphans. Good thing we have people like Mike De Leon who saved his works. We can have a retrospective of this man, and we can judge for ourselves. The same with Lino, most of the works are still there. So we're lucky.

KC: That's also the problem, it's really difficult to get prints. Some of the prints from Cinemateque Française are already too fragile. Very few people are alarmed by this. But this is almost an emergency. Something has to be done with our archiving. Even if it's only damage control. But it's costly.

RM: Lino said that his goal is not to make the great Filipino film, but to develop the great Filipino audience.

KT: I admire that in Lino. I always envied Lino Brocka for his mass audience. People think that I'm an intellectual snob, but I would like a mass audience. But I don't have that language. *Turumba* is the closest I've come.

LD: He was like a pedagogue, a teacher. Well, he was an activist, that's right. He educated the people. It's part of his perspective. I think, he used the medium for that, and he was also a Leftist. So he was educating the masses.

KC: What about that rumor that Brocka was assassinated in that crash? That it was planned. You think it was just an accident?

KT: I think it was an accident. Everybody likes to blame things on politics, and everybody likes to blame Malacañang [Malacañang Palace, the official residence of the President of the Philippines] or whatever.

LD: That happened during Cory Aquino's time and he was anti-Cory. Lino was such a huge persona during Marcos' time. He was the biggest artist who fought, made his voice heard. He was the artist's voice during Marcos' time. When he died, Cory Aquino was just two years in the government. The Marcos regime was still around. You can't rule out the possibility. It's very possible that he was killed. There were stories. I don't want to name names. The guy with him that night told an actor I knew that someone went after them, rammed into the car. A lot of people said there was a huge bump at the car's rear. Forensic evidence. Physical proof. He was killed. And before that there was this big fight in the bar he came from. Everybody knew who he fought with. There were threats, shouting. And then Lino left and that's it. But nobody investigated. Not the cops, not the press. Write it down, be responsible! Lino told us it was OK. And it could be done. Let's not dispose of that issue, that he could have been deliberately killed. Lino was not just some fish vendor. Lino was Lino. A lot of people wanted him dead. And it's part of our culture, this homicidal impulse. We kill each other. I don't think we should keep what happened with Lino Brocka in a box, say it was an accident and leave it like that. It should be investigated, written about, made into a film, a play. Let's put it to discourse. It's dialectics. You have to investigate all angles. That's also part of enriching the culture. It has to be dialectical in approach.

KT: I never had the feeling that he was. You've seen too many James Bond films.

LD: He's that significant. At the end of the day, what would the Philippines be like without a Brocka?

RM: Brocka is the most important Filipino filmmaker—that's what is being taught in film school.

KC: He helped shape the Philippine consciousness during that time because his films were widely watched, unlike our films that nobody gets to watch here. But, hypothetically speaking, if you take Brocka out of the political context he was in, he probably wouldn't have been as significant. His points would have been lessened. He'd still make good films, but with less impact. But art was just secondary to his cause. He found his acclaim absurd. He was a man on a mission. And somehow, art came out of it.

RM: It's essential to remember him but it's not going to be hard. He was, in many ways, in a perfect position. He was a political filmmaker during a politically charged time. Even in a nation that easily forgets , it's going to be hard to forget him.

KC: But his influence is not as pervasive as we seem to think. The calling of many filmmakers today is more personal, more aesthetic. In a way, it's crucial to uphold him, he's the entrylevel pointman to this untamed beast that is Philippine cinema.

Century of Birthing (*Siglo ng pagluluwal*), Lav Diaz, 2011

Batang West Side, Lav Diaz, 2001

Michael Guarneri

Everyday Struggle, Struggle Every Day: Lav Diaz Rebolusyonaryo

An earlier version of this essay was published on photogenic.be, June 2014

VII

Through a series of now legendary jokes in which the old-timer's caustic humour goes hand in hand with the tycoon's matter-of-fact approach to filmmaking as a business, Alfred Hitchcock perfectly illustrated, if not what Cinema *is*, at least how movies *are made* in Hollywood: first of all, mainstream commercial cinema is drama, and "drama is life with the boring bits cut out"—from which it descends that "the length of a film should be directly related to the endurance of the human bladder". Concluding his sketch for a psychology of the motion picture, André Malraux invited the reader to always keep in mind that cinema is an art that is also an industry, and indeed Hitchcock's aforementioned remarks pinpoint one of the most important principles at work within the filmic texts produced by the entertainment industry: narrative economy.

Let us consider a narrative fiction film produced by any film industry in the most abstract terms:

> [it] presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of this struggle, the characters must enter into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or non-achievement of the goals. [...] Usually the classical *syuzhet* presents a double causal structure, two plot lines: one involving heterosexual romance (boy/girl, husband/wife), the other line involving another sphere—work, war, a mission or quest, other personal relationships. Each line will possess a goal, obstacles, and a climax.[1]

Within this narrative structure, we will never see a five-minute shot of a man sitting around, saying nothing, smoking a cigarette from the first drag to the butt. Such a scene in a one-hundred-minute narrative fiction film to be sold as entertainment would be a useless waste of time for two reasons. Firstly, in the smoking scene described above there is no action moving the plot forward ("action" being "the outward expression of inner feelings", i.e. the character's attempt to get what he/she desires by means of physical behavior or speech).[2] Secondly, even if the scene does communicate something about the character's psychological state (e.g., he is probably pensive, or bored, or both), it does so in too anti-economic a way: instead of a five minute shot, the "pensive" or "bored" feeling could be synthetically and unambiguously enunciated by a line of dialogue, or by a much shorter montage sequence (close-up of the character with index and thumb on the chin, the passing of time on a clock, cigarette-butts piling up in the ashtray, and so on).

It is said that during the shooting of *Greed* (1924) Erich von Stroheim filmed everything in the attempt of building "a monument to realism": if character McTeague had to go from his flat to the saloon, the director required the whole journey to be captured on film—opening and closing of doors, McTeague descending flights of stairs, walking the streets... The fact that most of this "non-vital" footage allegedly ended up being burnt by greedy producers in order to get silver back from the film-reels is probably the best lesson about narrative economy one could be taught: industrially-produced cinema is the embalming of money.[3]

Now a fiftysix-year-old independent filmmaker working on his own terms, in his youth Lav Diaz, too, had to face studio executives lecturing him about movies being entertainment, entertainment being stories, stories being meaningful events unfolding in time, time being money, money being used by people to purchase two-hour maximum movies to watch in their spare time. As a matter of fact, Diaz's enthusiastic embracing of cheap digital technology as a means to reach creative autonomy results from his disastrous working experience at Good Harvest Productions, a branch of Filipino film production company Regal dedicated to the making of exploitation films.

In the Nineties, while making a living as a journalist and cultivating a passion for film and music criticism, Diaz wrote a few award-winning short stories and screenplays, which allowed him to start his career as film director at Good Harvest in 1997, it being almost impossible for him to find funds and shoot his film-projects outside the studio system. He subsequently directed four features for Regal—*Serafin Geronimo, Kriminal ng Baryo Concepcion* (*Serafin Geronimo: The Criminal of Barrio Concepcion*, 1998), *Hubad sa Ilalim ng Buwan* (*Naked under the Moon*, 1999), *Burger Boys* (id, 1999) and *Hesus Rebolusyonaryo* (*Hesus the Revolutionary*, 2002).

However, Diaz warns us that the word "exploitation" in Filipino filmmaking industry must be intended in its proper economical meaning, and not just as a slang-term for "genre-oriented film practice that produces low-budget movies characterized by risqué and/or lurid subject matters":

> The pito-pito ("seven each") was one of the most exploitative and brutal schemes ever done in film production. Regal Films-—one of the biggest production studios in the Philippines—imposed seven days of pre-production, seven days of shooting and seven days of post-production to us filmmakers. I'd seen production people collapsing from fatigue. During the shooting of Serafin Geronimo: The Criminal of Barrio Concepcion, I was having severe flu. I was drinking loads of antibiotics plus endless strong black coffee to stay awake and be able to finish it. I passed out on the last day of the shoot. Honestly, I thought I was dead. And everybody did it with very, very low salaries. It was hell. The process woke me up and so I left the movie industry, the so-called "system". [...] People compromise for a reason: at the beginning I was part of the system too. Things can co-exist and some people can live with contradictions. However, while working for Regal Films I understood that it's easy to do exploitation stuff and then inject things there, make a lot of money and say "Hey, I'm just having fun and it's only a movie!". Yes, that's possible and there's been a deluge of that since the birth of cinema but I can't do it: exploitation is never cool to me, both as a movie-genre and as a production method.[4]

1 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, London: Routledge, 1990. p. 157. By "syuzhet", Bordwell means the story-events as the narrator presents them, not necessarily in their (chrono)logical order.

2 D. Bordwell, Janet Staiger, Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film, Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. Routledge, London: Routledge, pp. 15-16.

3 Cfr. Arthur Lenning, *Stroheim*. The University Press of Kentucky, 2000, p. 195 and Stroheim's letter to Peter Noble quoted at p. 216.

4 Michael Guarneri, *"Exploitation is never cool to me": The Anti-Feudal Cinema. Interview with Lav Diaz*. Summer 2011. http://www.lafuriaumana.it/index.php/2-uncategorised/38-lfu-9.

Such "b-movies"—in the Philippines as everywhere else—are often praised for dealing with young/hip/counterculture subjects, challenging censorship, moral and religious taboos, or at the very least for allowing the public to experience some thrilling entertainment after a hard day's/week's work. This is of course true: for example, horror and science fiction have always been a privileged vehicle for social commentary, and denying the fascination every human being proves with watching naked bodies or gruesome violence on the screen would be hypocritical. We do ask for cinema to amaze us, excite us, scare us; we do watch movies just to relax and "turn off the brain"; we do want to live extraordinary vicarious adventures.

The problem is when an exploitative system is established, an industry in which exploited creative workers are demanded to produce low-cost movies that exploit sexual themes or gore in the belief that the audience is nothing but a bunch of mindless people hungry for blood and T&A.

As many colleagues of his, at Regal Films Diaz really tried hard to use the money and means of production he didn't own to put forward his personal vision and address issues he considered important for his fellow countrymen to reflect upon. At a closer look, thematically-speaking, there is not much difference between Diaz's early feature *Serafin Geronimo: The Criminal of Barrio Concepcion* and his penultimate work *Norte, hangganan ng kasaysayan* (*Norte: The End of History*, 2013) in that both movies adapt Dostoevskij's *Crime and Punishment* to the present-day Philippines. Moreover, there are striking similarities between the title-character of *Florentina Hubaldo, CTE* (2012) and the sleepwalking girl played by Klaudia Koronel in *Naked under the Moon*, whereas in both *Naked under the Moon* and *Siglo ng pagluluwal* (*Century of Birthing*, 2011) Lav-Diaz-regular Joel Torre portrays a man of God facing vocation crisis.

However, while working for the studios, Diaz did not have much creative freedom and he was not at all in control of his work so, for instance, he couldn't oppose Regal re-editing *Naked under the Moon* and adding a sex-scene shot by somebody else to "spice up" the movie and make it more "attractive" for the crowds.[5] But do the crowds crave for sex scenes and the industry is just "giving people what they want", or is it rather that the studios exercise control over production and provide only one kind of film for people to see? According to Diaz, there is no doubt about it: "In the case of Filipino audiences, they are always at a losing end, always underestimated and treated like morons who are undeserving of serious works. We have a very irresponsible and dishonest cinema culture in the Philippines. It is all business and bullshit".[6]

Again, what is at stake here is not that industrially-produced, ninety-minute slasher movies, star-vehicle comedies or tear-jerking melodramas should not exist. What Diaz objects to is the "feudal mentality" of an industry "protecting its turf", and preventing people from making/accessing films whose main focus is not on such narrowly defined entertainment. As implied above when talking about means of production, the "gatekeeping" is done by economic means: the studios are the only subjects able to face the costs of producing and shooting a feature on film, and having it distributed and screened around the country. So, basically, in the Nineties as in the previous decades, aspiring Filipino filmmakers would have to follow Lino Brocka's advice and "make some films for the producer" in order to be able to finance one personal project—which Diaz initially did, penning scripts for

5
Alexis Tioseco, "Indictment and Empowerment of the Individual: The Modern Cinema of Lav Diaz", in AA.VV., *Catalogo XXIII Torino Film Festival, 11-19 Novembre 2005*, Torino: Museo Nazionale del Cinema, 2005, p. 169.

6
Brandon Wee, *The Decade of Living Dangerously: A Chronicle from Lav Diaz*, February 2005, http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/34/lav_diaz/

the "action king" Fernando Poe Jr. and directing films for Regal while working independently on *Batang West Side* (id., 2001) and *Ebolusyon ni Ray Gallardo*, that was later to become *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* (*Evolution of a Filipino Family*, 2004).[7]

As already mentioned, it was the growing availability and relatively low cost of digital video filmmaking equipment (compared for example to the price of 16 mm and super 8 film-reels) that allowed Diaz to become his own man and avoid compromising his vision.[8] That said, it is now my aim to point out some of the main features of Diaz's independently-produced, black and white movies *Evolution of a Filipino Family*, *Heremias: Unang aklat - Ang alamat ng prinsesang bayawak* (*Heremias*, 2006), *Kagadanan Sa Banwaan Ning Mga Engkanto* (*Death in the Land of Encantos*, 2007) and *Melancholia* (id., 2008), and analyze the critique of the entertainment industry they put forward.

In *Evolution of a Filipino Family*, extremely lengthy shots taken from a single spatial viewpoint show us the members of the Gallardo family sitting still, listening to a soap opera broadcasted on the radio: together with the work in the fields, the radio program regulates the rhythm of their everyday lives, as they never miss an episode. What's more, the fictional lives of the soap opera's characters seem to be the Gallardos' favourite talking point, as they prefer to discuss possible developments of the narrative rather than their own present and future as peasants under Ferdinand Marcos' martial law. Here, Diaz implies that the seemingly-innocuous soap opera is an extremely effective instrument the Power uses to instill the Filipino people with the fatalism that has been keeping them slaves for centuries. Just like "[t]he various rituals of Holy Week [...] were used by the Spanish colonizers to inculcate among the Indios [...] resignation to things as they were and instilled preoccupation with [...] the afterlife rather than with the conditions in this world",[9] the aptly-titled radio drama *Hope awaits everyone* keeps repeating that suffering is inevitable and poor people must endure to get their reward some day, in the "other world" if not in this life. As Theodor W. Adorno would say, the *escape* has indeed become the *message*, since mass-produced entertainment is being used to distract people's attention from their miserable working and living conditions, and to keep them in a state of de-politicised passivity and apathy. Hence, what can be done to contrast the intoxicating, numbing power of the industry's tv programs, radio broadcasts and movies? Given his personal experience in the "system", Diaz chose to relentlessly attack cinema as "anaesthetic" entertainment, undermining the economic principles of mainstream narrative filmmaking.

Diaz is famous for the radical running times of his black and white features, with *Evolution of a Filipino Family*, *Heremias*, *Death in the Land of Encantos* and *Melancholia* adding up to some 37 hours in total. The "unmarketable" running time is of course the most blatant reaction against films as commodities to be screened for a fee at least four times per day: a commercial screening venue would never trade the opportunity to screen a US blockbuster or any Filipino mainstream movie several times in a day for showing *Evolution of a Filipino Family* once. And who would have eleven consecutive hours to dedicate to a movie anyways?

Albeit interesting, I think the issue of the films' running time constitutes the proverbial forest that prevents us from noticing the main characteristics of the

7
For details about the shooting of *Batang West Side* in New York and the ten-year making of *Evolution of a Filipino Family*, see the chronology "Brief notes on the long journey of *Ebolusyon*", in A. Tioseco, *A Conversation with Lav Diaz*, January 2006, http://www.criticine.com/interview_print.php?id=21.

8
A very poetic, first-hand account of Diaz's emancipation from the industry's feudalism can be found in Tilman Baumgärtel, *Lav Diaz: Digital is Liberation Theology*, September 2007, http://www.greencine.com/central/lavdiaz.

9
Reynaldo C. Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution. Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila UP, 1989, p. 12.

single trees. That's why I prefer to concentrate on the micro-level of single shots rather than on the macro-level of the overall film: if Diaz's movies are extremely long, it is because they are composed of a series of very lengthy shots, and the content and formal properties of these shots have often been neglected in favour of general considerations about the duration of the viewing experience.

So, what does the typical "Lav Diaz shot" look like and what does it portray? As we can see in the four movies listed above, most of Diaz's shots usually start by depicting the landscape—no human beings in sight. After a while, one or more characters enter the shot and cross the frame by foot—left-to-right / right-to-left; or, background-to-foreground / foreground-to-background. Once the characters walk out of the frame, we are again left to contemplate the landscape for some time before the cut. The camera has remained fixed on its tripod throughout the shot, immobile (panning being rare in Diaz's black and white movies). *Heremias*, for instance, opens with a series of three such "unipunctual" long-takes depicting peasants/peddlers crossing the landscape with carabaos and carts, and given the five-minute average shot length, Giona A. Nazzaro is right in pointing out that in this case classic cinema's "establishing shot" has become a sort of "settlement shot":[10] the fact is *Heremias* and the other black and white movies by Diaz demand a place in the life of the spectator who decides to experience them—they demand time, that is to say attention and dedication; they refuse to be purchased and consumed as "an evening's entertainment".

Coherently, the very way in which Diaz makes these films is far removed from the *pito-pito* industrial production system he was part of in the Nineties. Instead of tight working schedules, one-week deadlines, rigorous daily plans and screenplays to be followed to the letter, he prefers taking his time, moving to and living in the shooting location area for a while (Diaz always uses real locations), letting the weather, the landscape, local people and even chance influence the mood of the film and the direction taken by the fictional events portrayed. This process he calls "organic", meaning that his films are always "open" to what is happening in the real world:

> I was living near the place where we were shooting Century of Birthing, a very desolate place. [...] It was raining one day, so we went to this village to take cover from the rain. Suddenly, the place got crowded. We found out a meeting was about to start: the farmers from the village were having problems with a landlord and they wanted to organize themselves to face the problem. I thought this real-life situation really merged well with the struggle of the characters in the film, and me being a very "organic" filmmaker, I said "Let's incorporate this!". So I told the actors "Just join the farmers and I will follow you". It happened like this: a very organic process. And it came out well in the editing, didn't it? Take the scene in which the farmer comes to the shed where [actor Perry Dizon] is sitting, for example: that happened by accident. Then, I stopped shooting and I told the farmer and his friends "Can you talk about the problems you are having now, and about the problems you had under Marcos?". They replied "Oh, sure, we know a lot about that around here!", and they started talking. Thus, the assembly became part of the very structure of my work. This organic process allows you to see some lapses within the characters, within the story and within the other structures of the fiction film, and it works really, really well. That's the insanity of things like that, and it's pretty much obvious if you think about it: things are happening just... everywhere around you![11]
> [While making *Evolution of a Filipino Family*,] there was no general plot to really follow through. Everything was open—[...] My process by then would be to write the daily struggles of my characters. I will just follow them, and oftentimes I would actually write the script, the dialogues a day before the shoot or during the shoot, oftentimes as instinct and common sense would suggest.[12]

Diaz's conception of the screenplay is particularly interesting, as it clearly shows the independent filmmaker's rejection of the industrial production mechanisms. From official document and control instrument the studios use to draw up a day-one-to-day-seven production plan in order to rationalize and quicken the film's manufacturing, the script becomes just a "general guideline" that can be modified at any time under the pressure of the shooting environment and new, unexpected ideas: with its frequent calls for additional shooting, Diaz's working method sure isn't time- and cost-effective, but that's done on purpose, as his rebellion against the status quo is not just what we see on the screen but the whole, long, organic process—"the everyday struggle", in Diaz's own terms—of the making of the film.

The style of what we called "the typical Lav Diaz shot" tells a lot about the author's refusal of mainstream narrative cinema's modus operandi, too. In the Filipino film industry directors are encouraged by studio executives to take no risks, cover a scene from all angles and let the editor reconstruct continuity in the post-production phase. This method has always suited the film industry pretty well all over the world, as it guarantees the accumulation of enough film material to make a scene work no matter what. On the other hand, according to Diaz, the "assembly-line" standardization of filmmaking practice does little to stimulate creativity, innovation and anti-conformism in Filipino cinema, thus reinforcing the feudalistic exploitation system we already described:

> You know, a lot of filmmakers practice the "full coverage" directing—shooting a scene in all angles, top shot, tilt down, tilt up, pan right, pan left, zoom in, zoom out, the dolly, the crane shot, and then do all the close ups, the medium shots, full shots, long shots, establishing shots, cut-aways, lots of reaction shots. They do that on

10 Giona A. Nazzaro, "Heremias: io, un filippino", in *Filmcritica*, n. 588, September-October 2008, p. 398. My translation from Italian.

11 M. Guarneri, *Militant Elegy. A Conversation with Lav Diaz*, Autumn 2013, http://www.lafuriaumana.it/index.php/29-archive/ifit-17/16-michael-guarneri-militant-elegy-a-conversation-with-lav-diaz

12 A. Tiosecco, *A conversation with Lav Diaz*, cit.

every scene. They call it the *sigurista* directing; you have everything; let the editor suffer the pointlessness of it all. The usual practitioners of this kind of filmmaking are movie industry people. And oftentimes, to be able to achieve this, people would shoot for 36 hours straight killing themselves to exhaustion. And they would light their sets like there are twelve moons at night and twelve suns in the morning. I am not saying that this is not valid, this full coverage exercise. It is still filmmaking indeed. But talk about impatience, man. This is fucking film school. This is a fucking television commercial shoot. This is a fucking product shot shoot. But then it works for them, so ya, man, let's do the take 35 for that fucking close up, apply more make up and open the three HMIs to the maximum.[13]

That's the main reason why, as an independent, Diaz never practices the "full coverage" and prefers to record the whole scene in one take, from one single camera position. And even in the rarest occurence when he employs classical filmmaking routines, the conventions of the industry are sabotaged. In *Heremias*, for example, we witness the editing pattern "character watching something—thing being watched—character's reaction" (A1-B-A2): the title-character is spying some thugs plotting a murder and he is troubled by what he sees and hears (A1 and A2); the thugs are shown from Heremias' point of view (B). The only problem is POV shot B lasts sixty minutes and a few seconds of blank screen divide B from the thirty-second reaction shot A2—possibly a parody of mainstream narrative techniques, definitely a far cry from continuity editing's tempo and seamless, almost invisible transitions between shots…

Although Diaz's being a great admirer of long-take virtuosi Andrej Tarkovskij and Michelangelo Antonioni, his cinema is not at all an attempt at updating the style of the "old masters" to the digital age, capturing on mini-DV tape super-long, carefully-composed shots in which nothing "big" or "relevant for the plot" happens. As statements like "In *Evolution of a Filipino Family*, I am capturing real time. I am trying to experience what these people are experiencing. They walk. I must experience their walk. I must experience their boredom"[14] demonstrate, for Diaz bringing to the screen huge blocks of real time is the operating principle of an anti-establishment program in which an anti-spectacular form is used for anti-escapist purposes. In fact, in his adoption of the long take, aesthetic and ethic concerns intertwine, as the presentation of "lumps of time"[15] goes hand in hand with the decision of not cutting those "empty moments" of the everyday that mainstream narrative economy dispose of as if they were waste matter. Basically, with *Evolution of a Filipino Family*, *Heremias*, *Death in the Land of Encantos* and *Melancholia*, Diaz has been trying to re-instate life's "boring bits" into cinema, thus making films closer to the actual lives of his fellow countrymen rather than to the economic imperatives and escapist agenda of the entertainment industry. Utopic as it may sound, through his filmmaking practice, Diaz is actively engaged in a battle for freeing time from capitalistic exploitation mechanisms:

13
Ibid.

14
B. Wee, op. cit.

15
Andrej Tarkovskij, *Sculpting in Time. Reflections on Cinema*, London: The Bodley Head, 1986, p. 65.

My cinema is not part of the industry conventions anymore. It is free. So I am applying the theory that we Malays, we Filipinos, are not governed by the concept of time. We are governed by the concept of space. We don't believe in time. If you live in the country, you see Filipinos hang out. They are not very productive. That is very Malay. It is all about space and nature. If we were governed by time, we would be very progressive and productive. […] In the Philippine archipelago, nature provided everything, until the concept of property came with the Spanish colonizers. Then the capitalist order took control. I have developed my aesthetic framework around the idea that we Filipinos are governed by nature. The concept of time was introduced to us when the Spaniards came. We had to do oracion [prayers] at six o'clock, start work at seven. Before it was free, it was Malay. I am a son of a farmer and a teacher, and when I grew up in Cotabato on Mindanao, in the boondocks, I had to walk to school, ten kilometers every day, go back home another ten kilometers. Same thing in high school. […] So this type of slow aesthetics is very much part of my culture. It is not just purposely done, to say I am versus this, or I am anti that. It is my culture. I am sharing this vision and this experience, this Lav Diaz experience.[16]

16
T. Baumgärtel, op. cit.

The above autobiographical note confirms that the act of walking is crucial in Diaz's cinema. But what makes Diaz's characters hit the road, and where are they going exactly? What does all this walking mean?

By adopting David Bordwell's neoformalist approach to narration, it can be affirmed that *Evolution of a Filipino Family*, *Heremias*, *Death in the Land of Encantos* and *Melancholia* all start as a quest for something/someone—a job, money, a carabao, missing family members or lovers… However, as hours of screen-time pass and the searchers go here and there, no progress whatsoever is made, no decisive trails are discovered, no magical helper pops up to save the day. And if the Filipino filmmaker puts obstacles on the heroes' path (e.g., a tree branch in front of Heremias' cart), it is not to create suspense via retardation, but to derail the traditional travel tale altogether: as huge delays and fortuitous encounters make the characters lose sight of the high road (i.e., the main plot-line), the concrete objects of the quest progressively rarify, changing half-way or being abandoned altogether, until any hint of narrative causality and teleology disappears, and characters' actions become sheer quantity of energy dispersed into the landscape.

Heremias decides to make a living as a peddler on his own and quits the caravan of his fellow-villagers: he has to travel from point A to the town-market located in point B. For various reasons (bad weather, nightfall, hunger, thirst, need to rest…), he is forced to take several detours and one night, by chance, he discovers a murder plot. He subsequently tries to prevent the killing, but he cannot find any

help from the local authorities. He is also robbed of all his belongings, so he can't do anything but go away.

Hamin, a Filipino-born artist living in Russia, comes back to his native village after typhoon Reming killed his family and most of the people he knew since childhood. He walks among mud-covered ruins with two surviving friends, reminiscing the past and trying to decide what to do with the rest of his life.

Alberta is trying to overcome the loss of her husband, a member of a guerrilla organization who disappeared one day in the jungle while fighting against the regular army. She is also trying to raise Anna, a teenage daughter of *desaparecidos* who regularly runs away from home and prostitutes herself. In order to cure both her foster daughter's and her own emotional wounds, Alberta is convinced by long-time friend Julian—an intellectual and former revolutionary mourning over the disappearance of his wife Patricia—to take part in a role-play game. Acting as a prostitute and a pimp, Alberta and Julian travel around the country looking for adventures. Together with them is Rina, a depressed woman who plays the role of a nun and one day kills herself.

As made clear by the three examples above—taken from *Heremias*, *Death in the Land of Encantos* and *Melancholia* respectively—in Diaz's black and white movies the plot's causality-driven march towards a goal soon makes way for the non-structure Gilles Deleuze called "trip/ballad" [bal(l)ade], that is to say the aimless wandering of the characters in space. Indeed, for Heremias, Hamin, Alberta and the others, "it is as if the action floats in the situation, rather than bringing it to a conclusion or strengthening it",[17] with the characters turning little by little into automatons moved only by their own inertia. And since "inertia can be defined [...] as the inability to find a link between the permanence of movement and the movement's inherent purpose and meaning",[18] it is not surprising that Diaz calls his characters "lost souls and wanderers", sleepwalkers, unsuccessful searchers condemned to endlessly walk the Earth.[19]

Filipino film critic and scholar Gino Dormiendo, who played the role of Lino Brocka in *Evolution of a Filipino Family*, once stated that "any filmmaker that cannot make their [sic] point in two hours has a problem".[20] It is true: Lav Diaz has a major problem with Filipino film industry's conception of cinema as entertainment. As the present essay tries to explain by analyzing Diaz's 2004–2008 output, to the "escapist lies" Filipino audiences have been fed for more than a century he opposed with an independent filmmaking practice concerned with stories of ordinary people told through an anti-spectacular long-take aesthetic.

Since the metaphor Diaz has been using over and over to describe his filmmaking praxis is that of the "struggle", as a conclusion of sorts, one might be tempted to ask: is his rebellion against the industry being successful? Is the independent artist winning? The question is legitimate, but I think it is simply too soon to know. Only time will tell, and this is not just a pun about the filmmaker's predilection for enormous running times and open endings. However one decides to evaluate the prizes Diaz has been collecting in film festivals around the world and the difficult accessibility of his films for most Filipino people, he is struggling, and that's what is important: he has been testing miniDV, HD and full-HD cameras, upgrading his gear through the years; he has been experimenting with camera movement

17 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 4.

18 Ludovic Cortade, *Le cinéma de l'immobilité*, Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2008, p. 86. My translation from French.

19 Vinita Ramani, "A dialogue in progress. Social/Personal Memory before Heremias", in *Kino*, n. 21, http://www.e-kino.si/2007/no-1/preboji/dialogue-in-progress; Lim Li Min, *11 hours in a life's cause*, May 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/26/arts/26iht-fam.html.

20 A. Tioseco, "Evolution of a Filipino Family", in *Ekran*, 2005. Published online at http://ulan-sliela.blogspot.it/2008/01/ebolusyon-ng-isang-pamilyang-pilipino_12.html.

(the helicopter shots in *Norte: The End of History* seem to have raised quite a stir among Diaz's aficionados) and colour; he has been exploring the documentary form with an ongoing series of films dedicated to slain film critics Alexis Tioseco and Nika Bohinc, and to the aftermath of typhoon Yolanda; he has financed part of his upcoming fiction film *The Great Desaparecido* via crowdfunding, trying to directly involve more and more people in the cinematic struggle... As Heremias at the end of the nine-hour 2006 feature, Diaz, too, is marching towards the horizon in his endless search for redemption. It is still a long walk indeed, but as Filipino film critic Epoy Deyto told me once "True Lav waits".

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Nadin Mai
In Conversation
With Lav Diaz

VIII

Florentina Hubaldo, CTE. Lav Diaz. 2012

You said in an email conversation with me that you wanted to make Malay films, but that you have not yet completely achieved this goal. What would a Malay film actually look like?

I would say that actually I achieved it through the long films without really realising it. I've been trying to push myself too hard and too much, but it's been there forever, even with the early works like the *Criminal of Barrio Concepcion* and then *Batang West Side*. It's all about the struggle of the Filipino. You know, like Florentina Hubaldo is specifically about this long long suffering [of a] woman. It mirrors the long long suffering of the Malay Filipino, from issues of colonialism to fascism; the colonial periods—Spanish and American—and then the fascistic epoch with the Martial Law period and the four years of Japanese occupation. These are very fascistic and torturous periods of our history. And then, of course, with this new film, *From What is Before*, although it's specifically about the two years leading to the darkest period of our history, the ominosity of the film, it suggests it's been there forever. The suffering. This coming hell again. This is just a vicious cycle anyway, so it's just a different phase. It's a continuum. It's a continuation of the suffering and the sorrow.

How much has your upbringing influenced your filmmaking?

It really is a big influence, especially the very sacrificing character of my parents, because they're very intelligent people, especially my father. He is an intellectual. Instead of just staying in Manila, and be part of the bigger system, he chose Mindanao. It's still very raw there, very primal. No roads, nothing. He's a young idealist. He wants to work with the people. His mission is education. They keep working and working. They focus on saving the tribes, on educating them, from hygiene to reading, from building houses to, you know, everything.

So in that sense, do you see yourself as a teacher as well then, like your father, just in a different way?

In a way. My praxis is cinema. My methodology is different. But it's still the same. I become my parents, in a sense. We all do. I couldn't rest. I keep working, making films. There is this sense of mission just like they had, to just do things. At the same time, you integrate the issue of responsibility. Not just doing things because you want to do it. You have to be very responsible. There is the ethical issue.

How conscious are you on set? Do you plan every shot in advance, the framing, the length?

Sometimes, yes. The location becomes the template, the aesthetic template. So in my mind I can actually plan ahead and also when I get to the set, everything flows, you know. Something will come up and then I follow it. Everything is very organic, so I can plan, or I can change anytime when I go there.

I know that Tsai Ming-liang only cuts when it feels right. Are you working in a similar way?

Yes, yes. If it needs to be cut, then push it into another direction, then I do it. I just follow things. I'm a slave of the process. I don't want to manipulate or impose things, you know. I just follow it.

I read about your experience under Martial Law. That was an interview, I think, with Alexis [Tioseco]. You witnessed all kinds of atrocities, not only aimed at other people. You yourself were beaten, too, if I remember this right. Does filmmaking constitute some kind of therapy for you? Why do you feel you need to tell stories about torture, disappearances, you know, all these cruelties?

On the one hand, it's a cleansing process, personally. And I adjust that to my culture, to my people. We need to confront all these things, all the traumas, all these unexamined parts of our history, of our struggle so that you can move forward. It's a kind of cure. I always want to tell stories about these struggles. Personally, I want to cure myself of the trauma of my people, so that the Filipinos can also have a sense of examination. [I want to create] a more dialectical way of confronting our past, our struggle. Be investigative. Be vigilant. Be more, more…dig deeper. Dig deeper into your soul by seeking the truth about the past. And what are we now? Why are we like this? Why do we have this very, very dysfunctional system? Why do we have this very displaced kind of perspective? Why? Why? Why? So, you have to seek answers, and the answers are from the past. You have to seek the truth from the past, even the lies of the past. You have to seek all those things, so that we can find answers. You seek from the past, then it will provide not just answers, maybe solutions, if you examine it. It will provide it, I think.

Have you ever experienced repercussions because of your films? Or of your filmmaking? Have you ever had to deal with intimidations because of your films?

Not that strong. I'm just lucky that there are no venues showing the works in the country.

So you see that as a good thing?

Not really. I want Filipinos to really watch the films. But overtly, it's just not there. You just struggle to show the film in the country. There are no venues. Even institutions don't really help. There are a few which have, but you cannot only show it once a year, twice a year. Academ[ics] they show it sometimes. So in a sense, these things save me. But I'm not asking for it. I'm asking for a better forum for the films. We need cinemathèques, all these forums for the proper presentation of the works. I'm also aware that the situation is not like that. So we'll have to wait. I know the condition. I also don't want to compromise the work. I don't want to cut the work into two hours. That's what they want. If you can show me a shorter version of *Evolution* [of a Filipino Family], then I'll watch it. Come on. And the theatres—if you can cut

it into one and a half hours, maybe we can show the film on the weekend. How can you cut an eleven-hour work to a two hour thing? It's just horrible. It's just stupidity. The film is there anyway. So it can wait. But at the same time, you're negating the issue of educating your people as soon as possible. You have this thing. My upbringing is very catholic. I have this kind of guilt also that [very little] of the population have seen my work. So there is this burden on me that, Man, I've done 13 works already and a minuscule part of the country has seen the works. The burden is on me also. But at the same time, I know that my works are very responsible to my culture. That allows the balance also.

Where do you draw your inspirations from? I heard that you talk to older people as well. Is that where the stories come from?

Part of the process is that I talk to a lot of people. People in the streets, people in the barrios. They have a different take on history. They have different versions of history. They have their own oral history. You have to balance that with the ones that are written by historians, the ones that are claimed by publishing it as our history. You have to balance that. Our tendency [is] to revise history based on an agenda or a kind of perspective, whether ideological, political or just personal. But with all histories, I can feel that they are not precise, that there has been a lot of revision. There is a sense of essentiality in what they're saying, especially old people. There is this very primal thing about people telling histories through their words, especially the old people. You can sense a real connectedness with the past, as opposed to those being written, which are sometimes too scholarly, and it's so clean. But at the same time, you can actually salute or admire the work put in it. The research, the kind of scholarship that they did, especially the people who are really objective about history, then it's…you have to balance these things. The very primal oral history of people who don't read, they just heard those things and the scholarship of real written history. You have to balance these things also. I'm speaking for myself as an artist, as a worker, a cultural worker for my country. I want to balance these things.

All of your characters are in one way or another threatened by death. They are threatened by death, but hardly ever is death executed very quickly. Instead, you trace the mental downfall of the characters, who suffer as a result of external forces and who barely cling to life. Why is it so important to you to trace aspects of suffering? Why do you make the viewer watch these "living corpses" for so long?

Suffering is pretty much an inherent part, not just of the Filipino but of the human struggle. So it's been there. We have just created our own defences. For my culture, our defense is being very overtly joyful but at the same time there is a lot of misery going on inside. I want to work on the reality of the soul of the Filipino, the psyche, which is sorrow, suffering. That's one thing. And then, yes, they're barely clinging to life, they're actually living dead. I'm just mirroring the state of the Filipino. We're almost dead. We cling to life. Politically we're almost dead. Economically we're almost dead. It's a metaphor for everything that we are. It's a kind of malady that has been there with us. It needs to be cured, but how? It's a very systemic problem. We

have to destroy the system so that we can actually regenerate everything. We need to destroy the system, so that we can move. It's a system of dysfunction.

Is that what you're trying to do with your films, to destroy the system?

Yes. I destroyed the Hollywood system so that I can create my cinema, so that I can represent my culture. So that I can liberate my cinema. I need to destroy the system that has been imposed. It has to be two hours, that you need a cut-to-cut to be able to cut the time, to manipulate time. I don't want to do that. I needed to create my own framework, my own methodology. Part of it is about that. Destroying the system. Philippine revolutions are always about that: destroying the system, destroying an order. But somehow, we could [never] do it. This isn't happening. We tried to destroy the old colonial world, but we were barely able to do it. The Americans had to come to steal everything, and then impose another order for us. And we struggled for another hundred years to be able to escape this again. What's happening? The culture is like a living dead. We need to create some kind of rebirth, a new perspective maybe. Not a new ideology, because at some point ideologies are just conceptual. It's like a theory and you want to apply it. Let's get another theory and apply it again.

What role do slowness and length play in your films? The reason I ask is the following: Wolfgang Sofsky made remarkable observations about time-consciousness in concentration camps, where prisoners lived in persistent terror and fear, seemingly exactly what your characters go through. He describes that death was given time to strike. It was not meant to be immediate. There are strong parallels between time-consciousness in concentration camps and in your films. So what role do slowness and length play in your films?

What you discovered is very true. At some point, death will come. It's like a premeditated thing. But the premeditation is not overt. You have a sense of it coming one day, death. It's a foreboding. It's like in *From What Is Before*, there is this foreboding. It's hell. Hell is coming, and it's always like that. It's like a concentration camp. You're compartmentalised; this is the new group, we needed to orient them on how to work on these things, and then, next time, next compartment, we will not feed them, and the next compartment is the gas chamber where we kill them. So it's a part of compartmentalisation. There is slow death. But with the slowness of my work—I'm more conscious of trying to be truthful to the scenes. I don't want to manipulate the scenes. And the second reason why I do it is I'm trying to capture the way our culture moves, our people move. We move slowly; we wait for the sun to set; we wait for the heat to subside. We just sit there; we wait for the rain to come. We don't move. But yeah, subliminally, we're not aware that we're waiting for death. It's a slow wait. It will end in death. Everything. Anyway, we go there. There is no sense of liberation anyway. Redemption is what, a cigarette? The harvest that will not come because of the storms? The landslides will come, you don't know when. You don't want to move. You're gonna die anyway. Why run? Wait! It's an attitude. It's a characteristic.

Where there concentration camps in the Philippines, or any type of camp? I know that the Americans set up one, but this was the only one I could find.

We don't call them concentration camps, but prison houses. During the Marcos years, there were places where they put political prisoners—so called political prisoners—and that's where they tortured these people.

This reminds me of Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge.

It's the same. These are military camps, but inside the military camps they put these concentration houses. We call them political prison houses. That's where they interrogate the prisoners, where they torture them. The torture chambers of Marcos, we have them. They're not concentration camps. Also, there is a thing called hamletting. Have you heard about it?

No.

Like in my village, there are two barrios near the place. And hamletting is you gather all these people and put them in one area, in our case it was the school house. We were all put there. We just stayed there. The military give you food. You're like prisoners, for like how many months there? You cannot go to the farms. There's a curfew. Basically if you get out of the school you get shot. They called it hamletting. This is a term in the Philippines, in Southeast Asia, about gathering the people, put them in one area, guard them there like prisoners so that you can check the activities of the rebels. So the civilians will be put in a place. It's called hamletting.

Where you in one of these?

Yes, we experienced that in my village. I was in grade 6. You just stay there, the whole day. If you want to check your farm, the military will guard you. They will guard you to your rice fields. It's like a prison house. You're free inside the school campus. But you cannot get out. It's like a concentration camp also. A lot of farmers escaped at night to go to the farms, to check their fields. Some were shot. When they discovered you're going there, then they would shoot you. They will say: he's a communist rebel. We saw him in the fields, so we shot him. It's like that. And they had reason to shoot you because you were there, you were not inside the school house, the school yard. It's a way of cleaning the area.

You were all in one school house? How many people were there?

One village then would consist of one hundred to one hundred fifty families. They would be inside the schoolyard. In a way it's our concentration camps. It's our own version of it. When you hear that they were hamletted, it means they were put and concentrated in one area, so that the military can move. Or the paramilitary units, the militias can move and terrorize the whole area where the civilians were just hold up in one place.

I find that you're a rare species in Philippine cinema. A few years ago, Alexis [Tioseco] already pointed out that there weren't many directors in the Philippines who tackle the historical, political and social injustice to the same extent you do. I have seen Nick Deocampo's *Revolutions happen like refrains in a song* and Raya Martin's two films *Independencia* and *A short film about the indio nacional*. I have also seen Jet Leyco's "Leave it for tomorrow, for night has fallen". But these are really only a few films. Why do you think not more filmmakers go into this direction?

They are more into something else. It's also the background of these people who do things. A lot of young filmmakers now, their background is more like just being an artist, doing art for art's sake. Their early works are just a preparation for the mainstream, to do so-called big works, to become big time in the industry. They have different agendas, they have different models. They're not really doing films for culture. They're not cultural workers. They work more for their ego. It's a different breed.

Are they maybe afraid of touching those topics?

Yeah, because it's dangerous. You defy the Hollywood system. If you go beyond two hours you're gone. It's like a career suicide for them to serious works, to tackle history hardcore, or to move beyond the convention. They will not do that. They do things for their career. They don't do things for culture. It's a different perspective actually that defines these people. I'm not saying that all of them are like that. There are people who are trying to work, like Jet [Leyco]. Nick Deocampo has been there, although he is not doing things lately. He's writing books. It's more about their backgrounds really. Raya is a student of history, so you can actually see that in his works. He's also trying to understand out culture. Raya is a serious artist. He just needs to mature, stop looking for boys, you know. Stop being so romantic. He wants to die every day. He's one of the few who can really make good works among the new generation.

Do you think there is, in general, a good generation of Filipino filmmakers coming?

Yes, yes. You can mention Raya, John Torres, Anthony Sanchez, and Jet. They're the real cultural workers.

So there is a movement now?

It's a very informal movement. Nothing organised. But people are really working. They want to do things for our culture. They want to tackle history also. They want to be more dialectical about confronting and examining the Filipino psyche. I've seen some of the works, and you can sense that they also have that ethical thing, the sense of mission for our country, for our culture.

Would you say you're an activist-filmmaker?

I don't even want to use that word. It has become so bastardised. Activism for me is just being pro-active about the things you believe, especially for culture. In my

own small way, I've been trying to work hard to represent our struggle, to mirror the Filipino struggle, or the Malay struggle for that matter. In a way, it's my kind of activism. It's my role. I'm aware of that, and trying to work hard to at least fulfill a bit of an approximation of what needs to be done.

What I find interesting is that you say you're a kind of teacher, you want to open people's eyes, to let them know what has happened in the country and what is still happening in the country. But then, in all of your films you have some really horrible scenes. Florentina is exceptionally strong for that. Even though you don't show anything explicitly, you would nevertheless like to close your eyes and ears. You just don't want to be there. So how does this actually work? On the one hand you want to open our eyes, and yet you show something so cruel, which makes us say: we actually don't want to see it.

It's a confrontational thing. You have to confront the psyche. Fear is very inherent. And one thing that opens people's eyes, their awareness, is to confront their fears, to destroy the fear. That factor is always part of why people wouldn't embrace history, the truth of history, because there is this denial thing. One way to confront it is just do it hardcore. You don't show the thing but it's there. So it's one thing to confront the fears. I'm trying to be more dialectical. Destroy the world of fear.

That's the interesting thing. You don't really show violence, not on screen. You convey it through aesthetics. In Florentina, it's mainly conveyed through sound. Why do you not put violence directly on screen?

I don't need it. It's there.

Do you think it's stronger if you don't show it?

Yes, of course. It's stronger, because it's more inert, more inside. The fear is more inside. If you see the violence, then it's just a horror film.

Do you think the viewer would lose a sense of realism if you showed it? Because s/he knows that it's not real.

It depends on the treatment. There are filmmakers who can show violence and it's still very powerful. And there are filmmakers who don't show it. And it's more powerful. It depends on the treatment. You have to adjust to the flow of the story also. When that moment comes, then boom. It's not manipulated but you gain that momentum and when it's there then it will destroy their fear. … I want them to destroy their fears also. [Violence] is a cliché. To be cruel, doing all this gore and blood like Tarantino. And they're enjoying all these things now. They enjoy the blood. They clap their hands: wow! Blood all over the walls. Wonderful! So the fear is very superficial. It's not true anymore. While if you show it in a more primal way you gain that kind of momentum that evil is just around the corner.

How often are your films screened in the Philippines? I know that *Norte* made big waves in the country.

Yeah, it's the most popular. Before that, of course, it was *Batang West Side*. But *Batang West Side* has gained this mythical status where people, even those who haven't seen it, say it's good. As I said to you a while ago, only a small percentage of the population has seen my works. But I'm not complaining because I am aware that there is this struggle, the issue of venues. The people are also so used to Hollywood. If you tell them that the film is five hours, they will not come. The people who come are the followers and the curious. The curious will be converted or they will hate you more, depending on how they will see the work, depending on the condition they are in when they enter the film. They cannot believe that there is cinema like that. Their understanding of cinema is Hollywood. So, I'm aware of that. I'm not complaining. But at the same time, like I told you a while ago, there is the burden, the guilt. They say, why do you not do shorter works so that people will see it if you say you're responsible? How can I be responsible when it's already compromised? Cutting it to two hours just because you need to cut it for the audience, then it's a compromised work already. It's gone. Don't do cinema at all. I'd rather be selling barbeques out there. Yes, it's true. I don't compromise the work so that you can have a so-called audience. No way.

Why do you think *Norte* is so popular in the Philippines?

Hard work, and it's shorter. It's four hours and thirty minutes, and the producer, Moira and the new owner of the film, they're tireless. They keep showing the film. They're very good at that.

Would you want to market your other films?

I cannot do it. But if people do it, then it's okay. I don't care about the money, just show the film. If a few cents will go to me, then I'm okay with that. Just show the film. As long as the film is not touched. Don't touch the film. Just show it.

Where do you have your biggest fan base?

Europe. Because of the festivals. It's the festivals. I'm very thankful of these people, to the critics here in Europe who watch the films and do the programs.

Do you think that Europeans can understand your films?

Yes, of course. It's also the culture. Europeans are more into digging things. To work hard. To understand cultures. Europeans are not lazy. We're fucking lazy. And put this on the level of the critics. The critics here are more into it than the ones in Asia. There are no books in the country, no books about cinema. It needs to be addressed. How do we treat the works there? Imagine, there have been a lot of retrospectives of my work outside, but not inside the country. It's insane. Even for me, I cannot

fathom it. They've been doing all these retrospectives. But in the Philippines, no. There's jealousy, there's resentment, like I told you.

I remember that Teo, in *Encantos*, is a strong opponent of the West. Then you attack Western colonialism in *Florentina Hubaldo*. I know that Marcos was more or less installed and supported by the US. But now you're using Western technology to tell these stories.

You have to embrace that. Evolutions are like that. You have to embrace the new ones. These tools are just there to be used. It's a medium that has this kind of demand, especially cinema. It's very technology-based. As a filmmaker I need to do that. I will have to embrace it. Otherwise it's hard to do it.

With very few exceptions—*Norte* is the most recent one—your films are all black-and-white. I personally see that as supporting the narrative of poverty and suffering. Is that why you use black-and-white?

Yes, yes. Colour to me is very deceptive. It creates a certain aura of lightness. It's my perception as an artist. I want to do black-and-white to give justice to what the film is representing. Like poverty—it's better in black-and-white. Suffering is better in black-and-white. And beyond poverty and suffering, for me, cinema is black-and-white.

You even watch colour films in black-and-white.

Yes, I do that all the time. A lot of works, I don't want to see them in colour, so I put black-and-white. Some works that are short, I put them on my computer and change the whole thing to black-and-white and watch them. Colour obscures my view. It allows me to not really understanding the work. But when it's in black-and-white, I'm into it.

You can focus on the story.

Yeah. I'm into it. Cinema is black-and-white for me. I'm more into it. Maybe it's just a fixation because I'm so used to watching films in black-and-white. It could be that. It's just a fixation maybe. A fetish. For me, it's that; cinema is black-and-white. But I can make colour films. But if I do it, I'm very very careful. Just like *Batang West Side*, I spend a lot of time on the grading.

Batang West Side had a different colour palette. That's completely different from *Norte*.

With *Norte*, we did a lot of things in the grading to de-saturate so many things, because it's really beautiful, the colours there. So we sat down and I had to de-saturate on so many levels, in so many parts of the film. You see, it's so beautiful. It's obscuring the thing. So I had to de-saturate it. More and more and more. The graders are complaining: "There's no colour anymore! Put some more colour. It's becoming black-and-white." Oh really? [laughs]

So how do you actually shoot, do you shoot in black-and-white or in colour and then change it to black-and-white on the computer?

Before, I shot in colour. But now from the camera it's black-and-white. So no more changing of things. It's just black-and-white. [laughs] Again, because of technology. It's easier now. You get the things you want within the camera. It's your brush now. It's easier, yes. I mean the word "easy" is not about the issue of being lazy. But it gives you the thing that you want. It's there already.

The brush was a good point. How familiar are you with the aesthetics of painting? If you remember I tried link your aesthetics to Chinese painting. There are so many similarities.

I didn't become a filmmaker. Maybe I'm a painter or a musician, or a writer. Painting is one of my passions. Cinema and painting are almost the same in terms of playing with the light. Cinema is light, you know. You deal with the light. The same, painting is about light. You have to apply the same principle, the same philosophy. You're like a painter. You're sourcing the light of your work. You put the character, and then you check the sources, the particulars. What are the particulars? What are the sources of the light above? The door? The window? It's about sourcing. The same with cinema. You just start doing the palette, the canvas. It's about sourcing. Where is the light coming from? The very first principle is the light with cinema and painting. So it's almost the same.

Are you still painting?

I stopped. I couldn't paint because of cinema.

Have you stopped because you didn't have time or because you couldn't focus on it anymore?

I couldn't focus. I have other painter friends who … I respect that medium, so I don't want to make it as a hobby. I can paint as a hobby. But I would feel bad for my peers, the real painters, who are really working hard to do painting, and I'm just doing it as a hobby. [laughs] That would be sad. The same with music. I want to compose songs but then I want to have focus also. I want to concentrate. It's so easy to create music, really, for me. It's so easy to compose songs. But then, I have to really focus so that I can be good. I don't want to make it as a hobby also. It's an easy thing to do for me, really. Compose songs. It's really easy. I don't want to make it like a hobby. Be able to make money out of it. No, no. It's all hard work. You have to respect the medium. You have to be very responsible. Ethics—you put ethics always. You have to be very ethical. To be able to put [the medium] on a level on an art form.

I don't know whether you know the writer Milan Kundera.

Of course I know Milan Kundera.

He once argued that "a nation which loses awareness of its past gradually loses its self." Is your filmmaking an act against forgetting in that sense?

Yes, of course. That's very true. It's a very honest statement. If you forget the past, you can't really move forward. You're in denial. Everything becomes pseudo. Everything becomes fake. You create a persona. There's no rootedness. It's not an honest existence anymore. It's also about nations that just forget the past. It becomes a myth. The Philippines are like that. You keep forgetting things. We don't have a sense of history. How can you call yourself a nation if you don't know how to confront the past? If you don't examine the struggle, it's not a nation at all. A nation is all about that. There is this holistic view of existence; the past is important. Memory is important.

So you're the memory-keeper.

[laughs] Sort of. I don't want to be accused of being revisionist one day. Somebody will say: all these things are lies. He's not saying the truth. I may be accused of that one day. I don't know. I just throw the thing out. I'm just trying to be very ethical and honest about these things. But then, if it becomes a lie one day, then I'm okay with that. The works are there. It will create a discourse.

Have you ever thought of ending your career as a filmmaker?

Every day I want to stop. Every day. It's just a struggle also.

Why is that? Béla Tarr once said he had nothing more to say. He would repeat himself. So he stopped. Tsai Ming said that it was really difficult to receive funding and he got tired of it. He's still making the Walker short films, but he doesn't want to make feature films anymore.

It's a different position. I know Béla's position and I can understand it. I love his works. I love him. But at the same time I have my own struggles also. The condition of my country is a different condition. If I stop, then one responsible artist is gone. So that keeps me going. Fuck Lav Diaz. It's about the work. I want to keep doing the works, so that I can create a model, some template, some model that will even in a very small way help my culture. It's a responsibility. That's why I don't want to stop. But give me the chance, and I just want to go home and take care of my grandson, man. I'm better that way. It's better for me. I would feel better, because I miss my grandson every day. I love him. I want to be with the children. But at the same time, there is this greater struggle also, this greater responsibility that needs to be done. So maybe in three years I will stop. Maybe in two years. Maybe five more films, maybe three more films and I'm gone. If I say, oh it's enough, I have this body of work that can sustain the so-called model that I want to do, then I'm okay. I'll do a Béla Tarr and a Tsai Ming-liang [laughs].

Ebolusyon ng isang pamilyang Pilipino (*Evolution of a Filipino Family*), Lav Diaz, 2004

Retrospective Programme

All screenings and events take place at Cinematek, Brussels, except where noted.

09/09 — 20:30

Insiang
Lino Brocka, 1976, 95′, OV with engl. subtitles.
Restored version by the Cineteca di Bologna/ L'Immagine Ritrovata and the Film Foundation (World Cinema Project). Introduction by Charles Tesson.

10/09 — 19:30

"Personally, I want to cure myself of the trauma of my people."
A conversation between Nadin Mai and Tom Paulus about Diaz's cinematic representation of the Philippines' past, and the filmmaker's position at the forefront of "Slow Cinema".

10/09 — 21:30

Hubad sa ilalim ng buwan (Naked Under the Moon)
Lav Diaz, 1999, 119′, OV with engl. subtitles

12/09 — 17:30

Batang West Side
Lav Diaz, 2001, 315′, OV with engl. subtitles

16/09 — 18:00

Hesus, rebolusyonaryo (Hesus the Revolutionary)
Lav Diaz, 2002, 112′, OV with engl. subtitles

20/09 — 10:00

Ebolusyon ng isang pamilyang Pilipino (Evolution of a Filipino Family)
Lav Diaz, 2004, 292′ + 362′, OV with engl. subtitles

23.09 — 20:30

Jaguar
Lino Brocka, 1980, 105′, OV with french subtitles

27/09 — 13:00

Heremias: Unang aklat – Ang alamat ng prinsesang bayawak (Heremias. Book One: the Legend of the Lizzard Princess)
Lav Diaz, 2006, 540′, OV with engl. subtitles

18/10 — 13:00

Kagadanan sa banwaan nig mga Engkanto (Death in the Land of Encantos)
Lav Diaz, 2007, 540′, OV with engl. subtitles

23/10 — 19:30

Bayan Ko: Kapit Sa Patalim (Bayanko: My Own Country)
Lino Brocka, 1984, 110′, OV with engl. subtitles

25/10 — 15:00

Melancholia
Lav Diaz, 2008, 450′, OV with engl. subtitles

29/10 — 21:30

Prologo sa ang dakilang desaparacido (Prologue to the Great Desaparecido)
Lav Diaz, 2013, 31′, OV with engl. subtitles
Walang Alaala ang mga Paru-Paro (Butterflies Have no Memories)
Lav Diaz, 2009, 59′, OV with engl. subtitles

01/11 — 17:30

Siglo ng pagluluwal (Century of Birthing)
Lav Diaz, 2011, 360′, OV with engl. subtitles

03/11 — 20:30

Pagsisiyasat Sa Gabing Ayaw Lumimot (An Investigation On The Night That Won)
Lav Diaz, 2012, 70′

05/11 — 19 :30

Cinq et la peau
Pierre Rissient, 1981, 95′

08/11 — 17:30

Florentina Hubaldo, CTE
Lav Diaz, 2012, 360′, OV with engl. subtitles

10/11 — Cinema Zuid (Antwerp) — 10:30

'Everyday Struggle, Struggle Every Day': The Cinema of Lav Diaz
A symposium on the filmmaker's aesthetics, curated by Photogénie and organized by VDFC in cooperation with the University of Antwerp and Cinema Zuid. During this day-long conference, Lav Diaz' oeuvre is examined through lectures by film scholars Michael Guarneri and Nadin Mai, and a round-table conversation with the filmmaker himself following a screening of *Storm Children, Book One*.

11/11 — BOZAR — 14:00

Norte, hangganan ng kasaysayan (Norte, the End of History)
Lav Diaz, 2013, 250′, OV with engl. subtitles.
The screening will be introduced and followed by a discussion between Lav Diaz and Stoffel Debuysere.
In the context of DISSENT !, an initiative of Argos, Auguste Orts and Courtisane, in the framework of the research project "Figures of Dissent" (KASK/Hogent).

12/11 — 19:30

Maynila,.. Isang Pelikuland Pilipino (The Making of Manila)
1975, 22′, OV with engl. subtitles
Maynila: Sa mga kuko ng liwanag (Manille, dans les griffes des Ténèbres)
Lino Brocka, 1975, 125′, OV with engl. subtitles.
Restored version by the World Cinema Foundation and the Film Development Council of the Philippines at Cineteca di Bologna/L'Immagine Ritrovata laboratory. Screening preceeded by a conversation about Lino Brocka between Lav Diaz and Pierre Rissient.

19/11 — 19:30

Orapronobis (Fight For Us)
Lino Brocka, 1989, 95′, OV with french subtitles

20/11 — 17:30

Mula sa kung ano ang noon (From What is Before)
Lav Diaz, 2014, 338′, OV with engl. subtitles

26/11 — 19:30

Mga anak ng unos, Unag aklat (Storm Children, Book One)
Lav Diaz, 2014, 143′, OV with engl. subtitles

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